

A Man in Half

A blade of light sliced his seventy-five-year-old body in two. *Even Mermaids Get the Blues*, said a moth-eaten t-shirt. Underwater, the mythical creature played a lyre. Graham opened his eyes and stared at the dust motes exposed by the gap in his curtains. His thoughts, though, were deep-sea diving, trying to catch the sinking treasure chest of his dreams.

How do you cut a man in half? The old words came to him as he shaved. He hadn't thought about their patter – in fact, he hadn't thought about them – for a long time now. *How do you cut a man in half?* Whoever was doing the cutting would ask that of the audience. Then the other, the one being cut in half, would sit up in the body-sized wooden box and gleefully shout: *Like this!* Before flopping back down.

Graham couldn't understand why, but that always got a laugh. Humour is best left alone, Tony would say. Mysteries should never be poked about or interrogated.

Decapitating a boiled egg, Graham started to eat his breakfast. One egg. One slice of toast. A lonely meal.

Strangely, decades of solitude had given him a look of curiosity. Widened his eyes, slackened his bite. And he was curious. Still. About life. But also, he knew his place. He knew that a man in his seventies with little money, no family, and a smattering of acquaintances needed to proceed with humility. *Do not impose yourself. Take what you are given.* This attitude didn't stop him from living. It just kept him alert to the limitations of hope.

What had happened to his friends? He had had friends. Good ones. But people marry, get drawn away by the gravitational pull of family. He thought of the interplanetary dance of the dust motes in the morning's light. Constellations of togetherness with him as a witness. People also died. Men of his generation, of his kind, died a lot. There was Tony, of course. But Tony wasn't a friend.

That day – it was Thursday, and that was why he had shaved - the Ethiopian family in the flat next door played music from mid-morning onwards. Graham didn't mind. Unfamiliar percussion guided him through long daydreams and he found himself saying the words 'Addis Ababa' out loud. He liked the way it felt to shape those sounds. He elongated vowels at random; sometimes the A of Addis, sometimes the second A of Ababa. Or even the last. Ababaaaaaaaaah, enjoying the exploding the Bs.

Graham had never set foot on the continent of Africa. He knew, now, that he never would. Childishly over-articulating syllables comprising the name of a place he

would never see, orchestrating the music of words he would never speak to a taxi driver or a person behind a counter in an airport, was as close as Graham would get to any more geographical adventure.

Every Thursday evening, the same pointless drama. What would he wear to The Bells? The charity shop mermaid t-shirt had been acceptable for several years until it tipped from devil-may-care holey to raggedy hobo and was relegated to sleepwear. Also, t-shirts felt like a slimmer man's game. A shirt. But which one? Shapes of collars gave away their age, and most light fabrics were unkind to an older man's shape. So, like last Thursday, and the Thursday before that, and several dozen before that, Graham opted for one of his two navy blue jumpers.

He couldn't help it, but walking out of his flat and down the corridor he longed, like a much younger man, for someone to stick their head out, to let their tongue dangle, to exclaim 'Jesus – look at you! Don't you look smokin'?' It was a thought that evaporated the moment it hit reality. The limitations of hope.

Graham liked to get to The Bells for four-thirty when it was still empty. He could achieve lift-off with a gin and tonic. (He ordered a single, paid for a single, but was always served a double. The barmen changed over the years, but Graham, on a Thursday, at four-thirty, on this particular bar stool, did not.) By the time the place started to fill, his mood would already be set, and not dependent on the currents

of the crowd. After his G&T, he budgeted for two long, slow pints. They sustained flight for at least an hour or so.

Today, the barman at his end was Sebastian. Sebastian definitely hadn't been christened Sebastian. He'd more likely have been named Ian, or Kevin. Anyway, Sebastian knew the right balance between friendly chatter – enough to make it clear to the wider world that Graham was welcome and known here and that he was quite happy on his own, in fact one would guess that he had chosen to be here on his own – and leaving Graham alone so that he could watch with undisturbed attention the tragedies, comedies, histories, pastorals, pastoral comicals, historical pastorals et cetera that the highly committed cast of queer characters enacted under the gaudy lighting of an old East End boozier that had been converted, back in the eighties, into a sexually illicit, then passé, now ironic gay bar.

No one apart from the staff ever spoke to Graham. He'd spent years perfecting a complex system of body language and expressions to signal that he didn't need to be acknowledged. Need, that was the key word. Graham feared nothing more than being seen as that man, the one trying to chat up much younger men, buying them drinks. A fool. A joke. So he provided strangers with an excuse not to engage. A tonic for their guilt before they had even felt its bite.

In his darker moments, which were mercifully few, Graham may have felt that his life was a joke. To laugh at yourself is healthy, Graham surmised. To laugh at the idea of yourself, that is the end of dignity. Even clowns have dignity. Maybe that was what Tony had been getting at when he said comedy should never be interrogated?

I knew I'd fucking see you here you fucking old poof!

Rowan (definitely not christened Rowan; Barry, more likely) was at The Bells every Thursday. Not once in the past ten years had he spoken a word to Graham despite the fact they'd known each other off and on since they were in their twenties. Rowan had been a boyish beauty, with a very short summer. Making hay, he'd quickly taken up with an older man. The older man died, leaving Rowan a successful tailor's shop not quite on Savile Row but near enough to ensure Rowan would be breezily free of want. They'd slept together, twice. Then again, everyone had slept together at some point.

You must have heard? You MUST have heard?

Even one on one, Rowan spoke as if on stage. He was a starlet here. The young found him camp – hilarious! The middle-aged found him essential - no one could rescue a bad date or a dull mood like Rowan. And the old – well, he and Graham

were the only old ones ever in here. So Rowan rolled around the place all night long, having his glass topped up. A camp hamster on a wheel of fun.

Oh my God. Oh my fucking God – BABE! You haven't heard, have you?

In his shock at the news, Graham had left half a pint un-drunk. He lay in his bed, turning the phrase over in his head. Tony is dead. The Ethiopian family's music had stopped, but he could hear the couple in the flat on the other side. Their voices were raised, and he couldn't tell if they were fighting or being emphatic.

Tony was dead. That would explain the previous night's unsettled sleep. That would explain the disappearing dreams. Graham had plugged into the Great Oneness, the Universal Consciousness and known. Stop with that rubbish, Graham thought. You just slept badly, end of story. No such thing as a psychic connection, you flagrant old queen. But, still, Tony was dead.

Graham had been struck too senseless by the news to ask Rowan how he'd found out. What did that matter, anyway? They'd all known each other for half a century. Passing time and shared place - like it or not, they were connected. Except, how long had it been since Graham had seen Tony? Or spoken with him?

Twenty-seven years. In a garden centre. Graham and a friend (now dead) had been prancing about, cooing at the pretty flowers, ostentatiously laughing at the

phallic ones, with no intention of buying anything when, from behind a tree fern, Tony had appeared. The warning in his eyes was instant. And before Graham could even ask - Tony's wife and young son emerged from the foliage behind.

Graham remembered nothing of the conversation. He barely remembered anything about Tony. But Tony's wife Miranda's gaze on him – that he remembered. She seemed to be recording every one of his words, movements, expressions. To be transcribed and studied later. In the dark, on her own.

Graham knew he needed to see Miranda. He knew he needed to, but he didn't want to. Twenty-seven years on he wasn't sure he could survive that measuring stare. But need was the key word: he had made the promise about the box to Tony. Although, thinking about it now, that vow made in the heat of youth, it seemed absurd. Tony had predicted it would. Tony said Graham would think exactly this – it's absurd! - when the time came and that's why he had been so insistent. I don't know how you do a blood oath, Tony had said, but that's what this is. OK? A blood oath.

Graham had met Tony on an island in Greece in the early seventies. Graham was there with some friends and lovers from art college. Long-haired boys, smoking weed, naked all day long, camping in the coves and beaches; occasional forays into the *chora* for wine and feta. One morning Graham woke up earlier than the others, disentangled himself from the salty bodies on the tent floor and headed to

the water. Before he could take more than a few steps towards the sea, he was paralysed by the sight of a man coming out of the waves. Even though the man was in silhouette, the sun exactly behind him, Graham knew this was the most beautiful man he had ever seen. And would ever see.

Tony had an actual room on the island and the rest of the summer was spent in its shuttered half-light. When they arrived back in London, Graham with no job, and Tony having decided to pick up the Business Degree he'd dropped out of the year before, the opportunity to make some money appeared, well, as if by magic. An actor-dancer-singer pal of Graham's had decided to move to New York with the American lover he'd known for three weeks (both now dead) but he had a well-paid puppet show gig lined up at a children's party in Chelsea that seemed a waste to cancel. Graham and Tony balked at the idea of puppets, but Tony remembered a bit of magic he'd done as a teenager so they whipped up some props, and with Graham styling himself in tribute to Tolkien – they'd become Tony and Grey. Grey and Tony. G&T, they joked.

The Chelsea mother, dazzled more by Tony than the magic, recommended them to another Chelsea mother and so it began. An accidental sideline started resembling a career. Graham's creativity, not potent enough to be an artist, found its perfect arena. Its apogee being the box he created for their sawing-a-man-in-two trick. In reference to the phoenix, he'd painted it furious reds and yellows. All feathers, fireballs and livid blades of flame.

East Finchley, the Tuesday morning after the Thursday night Rowan had broken the news of Tony's death, seemed like a place cursed. Fine drops of rain hung spellbound in the air. Colour drained from the people, buildings, sky. Outside Tony's house, on a street too busy to be peaceful, but too quiet not to feel suburban, was a skip. And before Graham could ring the bell, the front door opened and a man holding a bag of awkwardly chopped timber came out.

Miranda? Graham called in to the deserted hallway.

Loft extension, Miranda explained, as she laid out biscuits and milk and tea. *What timing*, she added. Did she mean Tony's death? Surely not. She must have meant the work on the house. Yes, Graham chastised himself, of course she meant the work on the house.

After Tony finished his degree, he'd quickly found real work. Which meant their magic double act was squeezed into weekends. It had mainly been weekends anyway but now, for Tony, it was weekend work on top of weekday work. For Graham, the magic was all he had. As a compromise, they stopped playing working men's clubs, which had always felt like a grind, and stuck to kids' parties.

Graham could feel Tony disappearing, fading from their relationship and re-materialising somewhere else. He didn't know where that somewhere else was

until one night on the Heath, half an hour into a moonlit amble, Tony announced he'd met a girl. A woman. And it was serious. This was the first time Graham had been given to understand that what they had wasn't serious. Little else was said, and the sex they both found that night in the cruising area – with each other, and with strangers – was angry.

There was an overlap of about seven years. Tony dating Miranda. Sleeping with Graham. Tony moving in with Miranda. Sleeping with Graham. Tony proposing to Miranda. Getting married. Buying a flat. Then a house. This house; the one Graham was in now. Tony cut it off, or tried to, when his son was born. But there were relapses until, finally, the choreography of it all had become so far removed from its original impulses that both men gave up, exhausted.

After their opposite of a dramatic ending, Graham had seen him a few times more. Three times in The Bells, talking to other men. (Miranda had been abroad, Graham had found out from the barman. Who'd found out – of course – from Rowan.) And then that time in the garden centre.

I'm glad you telephoned, said Miranda. Her hand was frozen mid-air, teapot at an almost steep enough angle for tea to start streaming on to the carpet, and she was staring at a corner of the ceiling. The East Finchley curse had penetrated the house, maybe? It lasted a second, she shook herself out of it, and poured for them both.

I had no way of contacting you, she explained.

Why would she want to contact him, Graham wondered. She only knew about Tony and Grey, Grey and Tony, in their professional incarnation. She must have considered Graham a colourful bit part player from the more picaresque scenes of her dead husband's past. Before he knew what he was doing or why, Graham retrieved something from his inside coat pocket and pinned it down on the table in front of him.

It was the only photo Graham had of Tony. He'd had hundreds. Beauty like Tony's demanded capturing. One night not long after the conversation on the Heath Graham had burned them all. It was the only moment in his life in which he'd been melodramatic, and the thought of it still made him shudder. The one photo to escape his scorned diva inferno was of a nothing-in-particular moment. Tony sitting on a chair at a party. Looking in the direction of his interlocutor. Casually detached. The planes of his face, caught in three-quarter profile by the light of a lopsided lampshade, made Cubist.

The unimportant ordinariness of it all had allowed this one portrait of his ex-lover to keep growing in power over the years, so that now, as thumbed and faded as it was, it had an iconic quality.

Miranda looked down at it. A sincere smile. Something, though, in her body language – perhaps a dart of the eyes, not in any way a conscious movement –

caused Graham to look over her shoulder. On the table up against the wall behind her, row after row of silver-framed photos. Tony and Miranda. Tony and Miranda and their young son. Just Tony. Just Miranda. Just – that young man must be their son grown up? Smiling gods, in the Valley of the Kings. Monuments to four decades of life.

He felt like a fool, and sipped his tea.

And I wanted to contact you, Miranda continued, because I know... She paused. Or maybe he imagined she paused. *Because I know how much you meant to Tony.* She picked up a biscuit, snapped it in half, then put both pieces back on her saucer. She considered the broken biscuit, took one half, lifted it to her mouth, hesitated, put it back down again.

Miranda knew? Tony had always insisted she'd been oblivious. Her not knowing had taken the sting out of his – well, he couldn't help himself, this was just how he saw it – his treachery. Even though she was the other woman to start with, he had become the other woman and, a year into the overlap, he had started feeling guilt.

No way I can ask her about the box now, Graham thought. He'd sworn to Tony. Blood oath. But that was before Graham knew she knew and... Why had he come here with this ridiculous request? Who exactly did he think he was? Don't impose

yourself! Don't ask for anything not given freely! You're very much in danger of becoming a joke.

Graham stood up. He'd not had more than two sips of his tea. He'd been here barely five minutes.

About a year and a half into their relationship, packing up props into their van, somewhere in Kilburn after an unwanted, ill-received performance in the backroom of an Irish pub, Tony had started laughing. The kind of wild laughter that stops you in your tracks until it has passed. Once they were packed up and driving Graham had asked Tony what it was about. He wouldn't say. Then that night in bed, more laughter, not quite as mad, a sort of aftershock. In the morning Graham woke up to the sight of Tony, naked back to the room, looking out of the window.

I've never been happier, Tony said, voice very flat. The absurdity of it all had overcome him, Tony explained. Punters throwing pints at two poofs doing half-arsed magic in a grotty corner of London. *How do you cut a man in half?* A camp pause from Tony, twinkling in his sequined waistcoat. Graham springing up in the flaming box. *Like this!* Then the saw. Then the pushing apart of the two halves of the box. Graham's head sticking out one end, mugging at the punters. (*Feck off you eejits!*) His toes in the other box, wiggling to show they weren't mechanical.

It was all so ridiculous. It was all so completely the opposite of any kind of real, thought out, planned existence. Tony and Grey were so ridiculous, and yet – *I've never been happier*, Tony said again. And that's when he'd insisted on the blood oath. If he died first, Graham had to make sure he was buried in the saw-a-man-in-two box.

Graham was still standing. Miranda betrayed no surprise. *Do you want some of your old things?*, she asked. *We've been clearing out the loft and there's lots of your old stuff up there*. Tony had temporarily agreed to store their props until Graham found a place of his own, but that had never happened. *There's a top hat, I know that*. No mention of the box. *With a false bottom*. Even if she did mention the box, Graham still wouldn't be able to enforce, ask to enforce, Tony's request from beyond the grave. Get a grip, Graham told himself, that was Tony's wish decades ago. Before he had a child. Before – before all of his life.

East Finchley was still cursed. The pin-prick raindrops hung in the exact same positions in the air as when he'd gone into the house. He walked in the direction of the tube station, replaying the past ten minutes in his head. Replaying the past ten years. The past thirty, forty, fifty. And he felt – suddenly – a deep, stabbing pain. He had failed the only man he had ever loved; he had failed to fulfill the one promise he'd ever made. He had failed.

Graham's hand darted to his inside coat pocket. The photograph. He stopped, wet accumulating on his face. Losing that now, at this stage, that would be too much to ask of him. He turned back.

In two nights' time, Graham thought, he'd be back at The Bells. Hopefully Sebastian would be behind the bar. Maybe halfway through his first pint Rowan would roll up and speak to him for the second time in a decade. He might say something like *Life's a bitch, babe. Or, I'm going to the Memorial Service, are you darling?* And Graham would go home and sleep in his mermaid t-shirt and wake up in the morning trying to catch the heavy chest of his dreams before it sank into the dark of his waking life, and maybe the Ethiopian family would play music, and maybe the couple would argue or just be emphatic, and before he knew it it'd be Thursday again and he wondered how he would die. Not the manner. Not really how, but where. What would be the geographical circumstances? On the street? On his bathroom floor? A tumble down the stairwell? (A fall on the stairs would constitute his second ever melodramatic act. He quite liked that possibility.)

Graham was opposite the house. The second half of my life, he thought, has been so... No Addis Ababa. Not even wiggling mechanical toes. A mermaid with moth-eaten blues. Go in, ask for the photo back, leave.

Then a miracle. Stepping out the front door and into the garden, with the phoenix flame box, the saw-a-man-in-two box, over his shoulder, was Tony. The needling

raindrops sighed in unison, gave in, and fell to the earth. If this clearing in North London had been put under a spell, this glowing man was the hero come to break it.

Tony walked up to the skip.

That's mine, Graham said, involuntarily. He wasn't sure if the young man who looked like Tony had heard him, so he crossed the road, and said it again, louder. *That's mine*. He needed to explain, so he didn't come across as a mad stranger. *That was mine. And your father's. ...I'm –*

Grey! The young man had finished his sentence.

Graham blinked at Tony's son. Raindrops stung. No words came.

Tony and Grey? Dad told me all about you.

Graham was in a dream. Waves were breaking on the lawn. A man was lit in silhouette, the sun exactly behind him. Underwater music played by mythical creatures on lyres. Finally, words: *He wanted to be buried in that.*

Graham had said it. The puzzlement in Tony's son's eyes had no trace of mockery.
As Graham walked away, a slit in the clouds let through a razor shaft of sunlight.
He wanted to be buried in that.