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You are old, Flight-Lieutenant

— a tale of awareness

by JASON OWEN

I am remembering Martin Illingworth. Indeed, I have good cause to. It is not that I have ever forgotten him in the 15 — no, the 17 — years since I've seen him or heard of him. But now I have more specific reason to recall him, and to understand him and how he must have felt — then . . .

What I am remembering — so relevantly to myself now, these seventeen years later — took place in 'Occupied' Germany not long after the last big war. The British had drawn, in the victors' lottery, what was in the main the least interesting and the least beautiful part of the temporarily broken Reich: the principally flat north-west- which includes the vast, wide, pale plain of Westphalia. That is where I had become lost, at the age of 20; right in the middle of it, on an airfield, too many kilometers away from the nearest town for easy access, even if there'd been anything there but the same liquor, which was just as cheap on the camp (and that was cheap); and forbidden, uneasy relationships with the 'defeated' populace — possibly a combined dose of insincerity and clap. For that is the way it looked, particularly without the language.

Mine had been a solitary posting to this camp — splitting me from the friends of my own age, with whom until lately I had been animatedly sharing laughter — alcoholic and sober — and all the soul-searching that goes with quick-blooded young-manhood; encouraging others to paint, being encouraged myself to write. We had been determinedly making the best of our callow occupation: which, as far as we were concerned, really meant isolation, segregation.

But it was now to a solitary section that I had been singly posted, a section completely unmanned by anyone else and quite unmanning self-insufficient me in my banishment to it. I was literally it: the supposed spark to the flame of education (which, before I came, had never even been kindled).

And that is the way it went on for some sad, lonely months. The loneliness was not so much a matter of lack of gregariousness on my part, or of incapacity for friendship (all my life before, I seemed to have been proving otherwise), as of circumstance: occupational circumstance. The military force was not democratic; its structure was based entirely on rank. Off-duty, there was no facility for commissioned officer to mix with non-commissioned officer; senior non-commissioned officer with junior non-commissioned officer; non-commissioned officer with other rank. One was condemned to consort only with those who bore on their sleeve or their shoulder sign of equivalent rank to one's own. Each layer of this false society had its appropriate and strictly exclusive mess and club.

I, even at my age looking too young to be even an airman (just as, ironically, no one today will believe that I am as young as I still comparatively am: whatever was it that happened to age me so, somewhere, overnight?), held, as custodian of the camp's education, the acting rank

of sergeant. The sergeants' mess was peopled mainly by old lags — regular airmen, tradesmen — who'd had to wait and strive long to reach their present station. They resented this mere and very boyish boy who had entered so effortlessly and unappreciatively their midst. So, even if I had felt any affinity with them, it would have required more foulmouthed determination and 'charm' than I had will or energy to muster in order to break through that crust of unwelcome. So mostly I worked solitarily in my section in the daytime; and the evenings I would spend quite as alone, writing self-pitying letters to far-off friends, reading books (in such an environment Dostoevsky nearly drove me to suicide!), sometimes pretty joylessly getting very drunk.

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It was after one of those joyless thrashes that, one Monday morning, I climbed the three flights of barrack stairs leading to the attic where 'Education' was housed: late on duty, still a little drunk, eyes bleared, breath still smelling of some bizarre combination of alcohol which only the very young could possibly stand — Steinhaeger, Grand Marnier and Port, was it?

I puffed up the stairway and burst into my solitary cubby-hole; not too worried about my condition and lateness — I was, in that small corner, my own master. Or had been — until that moment.

I stopped dead and flushed in confusion when I saw, sprawling back in 'my' chair, a cigarette dangling from his fingers almost to the floor, his feet up upon 'my' desk, a Flight-Lieutenant. I can't remember how Martin Illingworth introduced himself but, at a distance, it seems that he should (if he didn't) have borrowed some words from a '14—'18 War poem and said: 'I am your Officer'.

*

For that indeed he was: although God knows why they considered that I needed one, far up there in that remote attic; or why he needed a sergeant. But nevertheless they left us there together, officer and sergeant, for some few months; and the days quite abruptly changed their character. I quickly and relievedly discovered that there was no 'bull' about Flight-Lieut. Illingworth, as indeed there shouldn't have been. I can't remember how early it became 'Martin' and 'Peter', but it may even have been immediately. For we must pretty soon have discovered our main bond: Martin, a colonial, had come over to Oxford from South Africa on a scholarship (and never yet gone back); I was due when I was released from my service to go back to Cambridge. Our common subject was English literature. But, apart from that, we spoke the same language, in the same tones; were with great good nature considerably sympathetic towards each other, could rib each other about our various literary tastes ('Good God, how could you possibly like that!'); although I had to, and indeed wanted to, show Martin respect for his greater maturity (not for his rank). I've already told you how old I was; at 31 Martin was probably the oldest close friend I'd ever had, and to me the distance between us in time seemed as wide as the whole Westphalian Plain.

But the attic marked the boundaries of our relationship. Outside it, beneath it, it was salutes and 'sir!'; and there was just nowhere, nowhere, where we might have gone to continue our friendship and our talk over relaxed and sociable drinks. Both of us drank too much — it was a symptom of occupational boredom, a disease of the plain (the Westphalian wobbles), not restricted to us — but never, of course, could we drink our excesses together. I was even then pretty sure that — while he should be quite a merry person — Martin drank with a greater basic unhappiness than did I. He'd tell me the next day about his mess and club nights; and about his past: South Africa (it was still then Smuts-time and fairly civilised), Oxford, a school where he'd taught and where he'd been very popular with the boys (wanting to be one of them, just as now he wanted to be at one with me); about his friends from these various phases. I suppose that, without knowing it, I used to read between certain lines. But these were natural, self-revealing subjects for disclosure between intimates, who were genuinely interested in each other and whatever there was to be told; and we had long, isolated days in which to tell it — Martin generally hung-over or being a martyr to his migraine and always, always, chain-smoking.

I suppose we talked about sex — it is inconceivable that we did not, as it was considerably important to us both (or why live?). I'd not long before — released from my English boarding school and my monastic moeurs there — had my first woman: in Westphalia! Martin spoke of someone who'd chased him in South Africa, but without luck. There were doubtless ambiguities; but they didn't prey on me any, rather added their own piquancy.

And so it jogged along daily throughout the summer months of that year. I don't think that we ever even tried to beat the rank bar, even by going for a walk over the dull, flat countryside I'd already in any case been led screaming from the few routes which existed. And Martin's feet were bad (all at variance with his tall and rather distinguished looks — 'sir!' and salute); and, in any case, something must have told us that open after-hours contact between officer and sergeant, especially of disparate age, would only excite comment. I doubt if we even voiced it, though; just tacitly accepted the situation. It may even have been that the days of such close, private proximity in our attic we considered quite enough.

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And then one day Martin walked in with the news that he'd been posted — to the considerably more sophisticated milieu of Hamburg (one of the compensations of the British Zone). I don't even remember at this distance whether he was glad or sorry to go, to leave the bloody plain behind (but how can he possibly have been sorry?). That he was sad to leave me I knew: he said so and I believed him; I knew as a touchstone how sorry I was to be losing my attic companion myself. But that was the way it always was in the forces: postings and partings.

But he rang me once or twice from Hamburg and there may even have been a letter. And then something constructive came from our keep-in-touch. Martin was actually returning to Westphalia to spend a

weekend with friends: a squadron-leader and his wife living in married quarters in the comatose small-town. He wanted to see me; thought it surely possible to beat the inter-British segregation laws just once; had asked his friend if he'd mind inviting me for the weekend as well. All I had to do now was say 'yes': which I unhesitatingly did.

And so I went as a weekend guest to the Lindenbaumstrasse or the Tannenbaumstrasse or perhaps even it was merely Auf der Ebene. But, kind though everyone even painstakingly was, I was never really at home in that little house-party, must have felt myself the rather shabby little sergeant being patronised; or somesuch. Or was it something else? What did my hosts really think of their friend Martin being friendly with this 'boy' n.c.o. (even if he did speak nicely and even if they did have literature in common)? How much did they 'know' about Martin? Did they 'approve', however fond they were of him; however tolerant of what they knew?

The one evening that I spent there, something which I should now consider socially unforgiveable occurred. My officer-hosts wished (naturally enough) to spend their usual bacchic Saturday night at their club in the town: creatures (as we all had become) of stultified but nevertheless compulsive occupational routine. This, of course, meant abandoning their guest as surely as if the colour of his skin had not been white. If I hadn't been so small, perhaps they might have thought of rigging me up in promoted finery (I could certainly have passed for a pilot-officer far more credibly than for a sergeant). It had happened to me once before in the home country (where it was a matter of far less urgency): I had been smuggled into an officers' mess in trousers concertina-ing over my ankles and in a great-coat as long as Goebbels wore. But there wasn't the same ebullient spirit of roguery in the stale Westphalian air; and, besides, within the narrow confines of Anglo-Germany I must have been identified and the heaviest reaction taken.

So I stayed behind, tucked away almost as a prisoner within the villa which I'd virtually entered clandestinely, quite calmly reading a book (I guess), it must have been for a fair number of hours. I seem to remember that there was a dog to provide some company for me; but a pretty old one that didn't speak much English. But I didn't mind at all.

Eventually they returned: drunk — not paralysed but very obviously 'having drink taken'. It never helps to be the sober one out in such a gathering; but certainly I had neither envy nor resentment. They were not alone: other club-members (army as well as air-force officers) were with them — 'ein für die Strasse, don't you know'. It was not to be known what they thought of the 'boy' sergeant waiting at home like a faithful mongrel — or as one of two. (In those days of occupation, a man could only be socially anonymous if naked: naturally enough uniform was 'de rigueur' for occupation forces.)

I was sober enough to mark their glances; but never more than when I saw a colonel sharply note a perfectly innocent gesture which I made. I was standing behind the chair in which my drunken friend was characteristically sprawling. Something in the situation — don't ask me what it was at this remove — demanded that I give him encouragement, or show some sort of esoteric contact between us. I squeezed his shoulder.

Immediately I knew what the sharp-eyed colonel concluded. I couldn't really blame him — in his place . . . I was only anxious that vulnerable old Martin should not get into any trouble, and I unobtrusively removed myself away from his chair as if I were one with the drifting smoke from his dangling cigarette.

Later that night, when I may have been asleep or I may not — I am such a light sleeper that there is sometimes little enough difference — Martin came to my bedroom. I don't think that I was surprised; and I probably knew immediately why he had come. Although that is not to say that I had actually expected the occurrence in any way; that I had given such a possibility coherent thought. I was young and, if to be fairly unaware is to be fairly innocent, then I was innocent. And what indeed is 'innocence' mostly but being unaware; looking with eyes which do not really see, have not yet learned to recognise the multifarious 'what's-what' of life? When I think back to those days of such corporate living with its constant physical proximities — knowing, being aware of, what I do/am today — I realise how much there must have been of which I remained innocent; unaware of it only because I had not learned to see it: a very young and rather pretty-looking and highly hot-blooded 'boy' who escaped; who merely floated, blindly, by . . . Yet, if there was much of which I did indeed remain unaware in the wide old wicked world, I was, as a product of an English public-school, by no means t o t a l l y innocent. If within a very enclosed field, I nevertheless knew basically what was what; but I was now quite confident that all 'that' I'd left very far and forever behind me. Yes, certainly — for all my 'unawareness' — I was a far more sophisticated chick than Martin gave me credit for. Although his wariness was understandable . . . I remember the drunken melodrama of his opening words: 'I could get court-martialled for this.' And, remembering the colonel, it was doubtless so; but it didn't say much for his estimate of our understanding if he thought that I was likely to make a complaint against him for whatever 'this' turned out to be; that anything which happened inside that Westphalian Schlafzimmer, which was more like a secret turret in a Schloss, would ever be noised outside it.

His confession then was almost tearful in its melodrama: 'Peter, I am a homosexual'. But he should have had reassurance (perhaps even unwelcome, so q u i c k l y did it come!) from my reply there in the dimness: 'That's all right, Martin. I wasn't at boarding school for nothing, you know.' And then he spoke of 'love'; how from that first encounter in the attic section . . . I was embarrassed: 'love' between two men didn't seem within my personal terms of reference. It was probably that love (as I now understand it) for any other person, of whatever gender, was beyond the limits of the maturity which I had then reached. I knew that I was certainly very fond of Martin — as I was of many of my other friends (a great boy for friends: me) — but 'love', no.

His protestation of affection was followed by very tentative fumbblings on my bed. 'Wait a minute, Martin!' I said. 'Wait until I get my clothes off, man. I mean: if we're going to do this thing, let's make a good job of it!'

I knew in the darkness that he was amazed at my quick compliance;

maybe a little disappointed even at the 'easiness' (most of us know how it can work that way, after the build-up of big but o so wary hopes). 'I've told you before,' I said: 'I wasn't at boarding school for nothing. If y o u want it, Martin, I'm quite willing.'

And by then my pyjamas were off and I lay there naked and ready to please him, or be pleased by him. Which is really how it went: I lay back and let him show his affection and desire for me; while I gently stroked his head and perhaps lightly kissed his forehead, engaged in my own way in expression of my fondness, and even pity, for my unhappily drunken friend, who wanted to do this thing with me.

Once he asked: 'Are you very disgusted with me?' — after a particular act of love-making, which (unknown to him) had often occupied my fascinated imaginings. I was only disappointed that it wasn't more exciting than I had always daydreamt. In fact, it was none of it as exciting, not as I'd hoped but as I'd expected. For, apart from wanting to please Martin, I was also not one to fight shy of possible kicks, and I was also curious: not as to how physical contact with one of my own sex would be (for I'd been to boarding school, you will remember) but as to whether I would still obtain any excitement from it after a good two years of non-practice. What need after all was there for it? now that I had passed forever beyond those cloistered gates, even if I had been surprised not to find a queue of girls waiting for me as I emerged, protesting their amorous welcomes. But I'd had my first woman now, dammit! hadn't I? And there'd been various other episodes of sentimentality and sex since I'd been in uniform, even if only with one girl had there been anything as united as copulation. Yet, remembering now so much, the wonder must nevertheless have been with me as to whether I did not have something of permanent homosexuality about me after all. It was, therefore, to an extent a relief not to have been more excited, a quelling of a sub-conscious fear. I must have let on to Martin in some way or other that I hadn't been as thrilled as all that; and I remember his agonised repetitions of 'It's because I'm so old. It's because I'm so old...' I stroked his forehead again quite tenderly and doubtless tried to reassure him, not very successfully: 31 did, in fact, seem hellishly old to me.

*

And so the weekend ended: the rest is rather a blur to me, although there is an echo of a sentimental parting which I had tried to avoid, when my forgiveness was so unnecessarily begged and when I was very embarrassed. Martin returned to Hamburg and I to the well-out-of-dreary-town attic which we had shared. Ludicrously they'd given me another officer now: a young pup, just older enough than myself to have completed his flying training (my own had been terminated by the falling of the atom bomb) and to have been commissioned. Why, he didn't even talk prettily like I did and his personality was somewhat pale: indeed, I treated him with a faint contempt, 'sir!' and salute.

I wrote to Martin in a week or so and reacted to my weekend in the Linden-tannen-ebene-strasse. 'Thank you, Martin,' I wrote, 'for proving to me that I am not a homosexual; for I was a little worried — and the fact that I didn't enjoy it more completely reassures me.'

I was at the age and stage when I thought that candour was the greatest possible personal quality, whatever the results of it: what could be more typical of unbruised youth than that?

I know now that what I wrote to Martin was one of the unkindest things I have ever done to someone I liked so well. I have been gradually realising it over the years; but never more searchingly than now when I painfully suffer myself (proved to have been so wishful in imagining that my experience with Martin Illingworth was leading me assuredly along a completely straight, completely 'hetero' track) and now that I am (already a year or two past that great senile milestone of 31) victim of the very callous (and far less candid) hand of another 20-year-old, who was never as fond of me (in spite of all his shallow protestations) as I was of Martin Illingworth, or as 'kind' as in my heart I only then wished to be to him, but glibly equating 'honesty' with 'kindness'. Perhaps I was only acting, to my mind, in accordance with one of Martin's more effective chidings of me up there in our attic. I had said that someone was 'very sincere', 'What does that mean!' he had snorted (making me feel momentarily far less than even my 20 years). 'That is something quite meaningless to say: either a person is ipso facto sincere or obviously you just do not bother with him!'

He never replied to my letter; but some weeks later the telephone rang in the attic and a voice enquired whether the education officer was there: a shaking voice. No, he was not — the young pup was off barking up some tree elsewhere —: but couldn't I help? was there a message? would he leave a name? No, I couldn't. No, there wasn't. The voice was strangely hesitant and full. (I recognise it now, for I have been lately myself suffering and shaky at the end of a telephone line.) I suppose that in my subconscious again I knew that it was Martin (who could have had no interest whatsoever in the callow, colourless young pup); but there was nevertheless an uncertainty; and it was all over so quickly — such a brief *demande et réponse*, sequence of negatives. I was somehow a little too young to be surer and to have risked a 'Martin! How / where are you?!' How many ungrasped moments after all life contains.

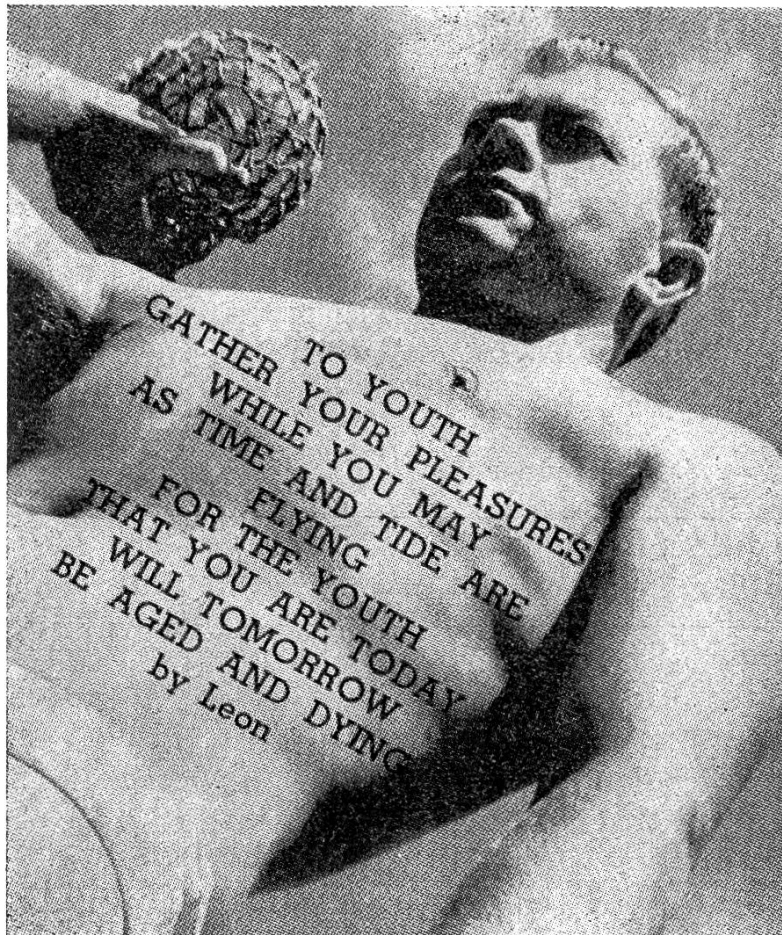
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Many, many Christmases since — there have after all been a good sixteen: not on all of them, but on many of them — I have sent a greetings card to Martin Illingworth at the only address I ever had for him: c/o his old Oxford bank. (I am a great keeper-in-touch: a man of leech-like loyalties, using Christmas as an annual means of that only!)

Generally my cards have contained also a brief message: 'Write (or ring), you old bastard!' They have never been returned to me, any of them, suggesting that at least they went on somewhere or other — perhaps even to his politically hateful country (where he may have returned, to hide); suggesting that somewhere or other he still lives, not even yet 50 (but there was such an unhappy air of doom about him that one has often wondered). My affection has not diminished; only my shame has increased. Each more recent December that I have sent a 'please forward'

envelope to Oxford I have said: 'Well, that's the last! If the bugger doesn't want to reply —or if the poor old sod is dead...'

But nevertheless, after all this recent re-rousing, I shall doubtless try again this coming Christmas with more holly and robins. I am, after all, *remembering* Martin Illingworth. Now that I've written it, I'd like most of all to send him this story as my more solid and most genuine 'awful sorry, chaps!': my youth now over like his, and my spirit even more bruised than his can have been by my clumsy, glib, selfish insensibility. I have my own very good cause for remembering him: fellow-traveller, fellow-sufferer...



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