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CODA (an extract)

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Abstract

Take five!

Take longer if you feel like it.

Here's this crazy, this wacker, this ... this ... whatever you feel like calling the poor coot, obsessed, so riddled with this maggot to sing, golden-throated, golden-tongued, Tosti's last song, the ultimate lament, from a bridge in Venice, a bridge spanning one of the smaller canals leading into the bassino.

THEA ASTLEY

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Ah well.

For a once-off?

To frighten the gondoliers? The tourists? Send sonic but useless messages to a lost love?

Well, maybe.

Nothing but water and bells, he imagined, and his voice, rapturous with resonance, rocking the bassino into wavelets.

He lifted his head into dawn air, inhaled deeply, opened his mouth wide, wider, and launched into the opening bars of *L'ultima canzone: M'han detto che domani, Nina vi fate sposa*, he sang. Full. Loud. Louder. Resonance.

Rez-o-nance!

Workmen going by hesitated, grinned widely, leaned against the bridge railing and eyed him from under their caps with pleasure. One joined in. They sang *duetto*, allowing their voices to melt into curves that floated up and over the water, dominating the liquidity of bells, curling into the wisps of cirrus teasing church spires across that glinting world. His song was a gondola of grief on which he poled away from the watchers, even his singing partner, oblivious to their surprise of delight, sensing only the rotundity of sound as it left his throat, curvilinear.

When he reached the last throbbing note – and he allowed it to throb in the finest Italianate style – there was a burst of applause, ragged, fragmented, from the loiterers. '*Grazie*,' he said with a self-mocking bow. '*Grazie. Molte grazie.*'

Without looking into their smiles, their curiosity, he turned and began walking away quickly, losing himself in a network of alleys and lanes, crossing market squares, moving ever farther and farther from the hotel where his wife was now unpacking in the too expensive room their travel agent had booked. Leaving now before the old routine set in, the museum

trudging, gallery goggling, piazza dining turning each day into its organised monetary orgasm. Bells reached a climax of slashed air about him, cutting small winds to streamers from a tower across the square; and he chased after their summons and entered a world filled with the cobwebs of ancient prayers.

He was, is, interested in the processes of goodness, the abstractions of duty, self-sacrifice, the sheer purity of the unladen soul. On this morning of early March, striding across the endless skies, as it were, of Venice's floating floor, the sole-heel-toe of him felt no paving, no grit and agonised clutch to earth. As if involved in chicane, in subterfuge, he had whizzed from that hotel room scooting across arpeggios of bellringers, silently exhorting steeples, workmen, cringing cats, sly before-times moneychangers, insomniac tourists, in order to utter the briefest aspiration of God-directed gratitude.

So long, Bosie!

So long, Bimbo and Chaps!

Bimbo and Chaps now not quite completing academic courses, not quite dropping out.

Bosie unpacking the drip-dry and hanging it carefully on racks in the monstrous wardrobe that threatened the bed.

So long! *Arrivederci!*

A mass was half-completed, the sanctuary bell ringing at the elevation of the Host, the saddened weathered cunning simple duplicate human discs raised, lowered, raised, the prayers pressed like everlastings between hands draped with rosaries, rings and the tiredest of tired skins.

Kneeling with chin on knuckled hands he thought of Bosie. Why didn't she laugh? Ever? Once, listening to a political leader gabbling idiotically away on television, he had commented, 'They've left the scrambler on.' Not a smile. Not a glimmer of a smile. She was unmoved by most things of the spirit. And another once when he played her Te Kanawa singing Strauss's *Vier Letzte Lieder* with that effortless floating, effortless buoyancy of the heart out of sight, a bird – out – of – sight, ah, she had switched on the Hoover and worked around his scuffed running shoes.

There was nothing like the Romantics, he had informed her, talking to air. The hell, he had told her, with Victorian schmalz and tenors, me dear, one hand lightly placed on the grand, moustache always blond down-drooping, thrumming to the tentative occasionally wrong notes struck by an hour-glass garbed woman-fashion, swaying on the piano stool. She had kept on Hoovering. But Tosti! Brain had begun to shout above the racket. Who could resist him? He couldn't. Partly for the thought of that ingratiating Latin giving music lessons to the royal toad and the toad's children in the soot and gas lamps of London.

His own eyes were stained with the sea as he explained.

Jesus God! *L'ultima canzone!* He would try not to remember that it was written at Folkestone.

He flicked off the player and began singing to his Hoovering wife.
 The last song.
 Over
 and
 over.

'For Chrissake!' Bosie had screamed, going out to the pool and an aureole stench of guinea flower. 'Will you give up on that goddam song! That bloody song!'

'Mother,' he had reprimanded, following his wife and breaking from lyric mode to speech mid-note, 'played it for father.'

'I don't,' Bosie shouted, her small acquisitive face screwed up into what Brain recognised as the first honest resentment in twenty years of marriage, 'give a stuff if she played it for the president of the Yew Ess of Ay or Yasser Arafat.' A leaf dropped its exclamation point, tested her hair briefly and fluttered away to the terrace.

That vignette he offers now to his raw and guilty soul. Or had he screamed slut? He couldn't remember.

He was hugging his personal alto rhapsody to himself like a comforter, a warmer, a cuddle-bunny of escape into unachieved but dreamt-of contacts, say: girl crossing landscape – serious, gawky – on a lonely beach on Magnetic; girl swinging into bus-stumble, his quickly gallant hand supporting a succulence of flesh, wanting, oh God, wanting what? He could accept the lust in either vignette with the figure erased from landscape.

Was he a queer?

Years ago – three? four? – Nina Waterman had knelt literally at his feet on a pool scootway flooded by the splashings of yoicks, polluted by arcadian flat-chested nymphs and lugger shepherd boozers, and bowed her magnificent head as his party song climaxed – *honey, did yo' hear dat mockin' bird sing las' night?* To lager and stubby wash of the good ship Hackendorf, Brain Hackendorf sang.

When he left the church the gondolas on the canal swung by with barely a glance from boatered polesters under the thin wash of early sun damped down by mist, pollution and the rags of sea-dragging cloud.

So long, Bosie, now rinsing out her underwear to hang on a neat pack-away traveller's clothesline hooked across bathtub or shower screen.

In a room whose ceiling was cluttered with *putti*.

Something nagged.

Guilt.

Impulsively he rang Kathleen from a pay phone at an *ufficio postale*, ignoring the thought that it was now nearly midnight in Brisbane.

'Mother,' he said without preamble, 'I've left Bosie.'

'Where, dear?' his mother asked. Her voice came through as strongly as if she were in the next phone booth.

'In Venice.'

'Darling,' Kathleen said, 'what a lovely place to leave her.'