



James Clelland

SHORT STORIES

Imagine

I recognised the two figures sitting in the dilapidated garden-shelter at the far end of the hospital grounds. He was unshaven, his crouched, emaciated body shrouded in a ragged leather coat, like a Nazi reject. As usual, he had left his teeth in a jar somewhere. She had short greasy hair, wore a red anorak zipped right up and was enormously fat. Her mini-skirt, worn for fifteen years and almost fashionable again, ended at an acre of purple-white flesh that resembled studded plastic upholstery.

It was hard to find peace in this place. I only wanted to slip away for my short midday break and catch up with some studying. But there they sat, half-turned towards one another, in the isolated shelter, my destination. The gardens are usually ignored by everyone, including the gardeners, and I looked forward to a half-hour of total solitude. My exams were looming up and I was becoming desperate. Besides, I had other problems on my mind and the last thing I wanted was company. Especially that pair.

Before they turned in my direction, I skipped over the low hedge beside the path and lay down on the grass, it was closer to them than I would have liked but better than turning back and being seen. The low murmur of voices from the shelter told me I was safe. Fortunately the grass was dry, for it was one of those glorious summer days, a rare perfection, with a bright-blue sky and only a few light clouds on the horizon. Opening the textbook at the chapter on 'The Expression of Mental Disorders' and supporting my chin in my hand, I stared at the blur of words. A slight breeze tickled the page. A bead of sweat ran unevenly down my back. My mind wandered.

It has always puzzled me why nurses need to study so much, particularly in my speciality. It's such a practical occupation and brawn is more important than brain. That's why male nurses predominate in here. Yet, I enjoy reading, even studying, for it concentrates the mind wonderfully, helps blot out stray thoughts and worries. My wife thinks I'm mad. She thinks nursing is for females, tells me I should get a decent man's job, like digging roads or driving lorries, and read the *Daily Record* instead of textbooks. She doesn't understand. Of course, it's mostly the money she's worried about. I don't worry much about that, although things will get a bit tight when the kid arrives. She can't understand why I like it in here.

I couldn't concentrate on the book. Maybe it was the heat. I tried shaking my head to clear away the matrimonial debris but that didn't help. I found myself listening to the voices over the hedge, from the couple in the shelter.

"Ah'm gonny shing ye a shong, hen, OK? Ye'll like it, shure ye will, eh? Eh? Shure ye'll love it when ah shing tae ye?" She giggled in response. He continued. "Here we go, then. *I've got yooo... under ma shkin... dae ye ken it? Join in then, eh? Gie's a wee haun... I've got yooo... deep in the huart of-a me... Whit's wrang wi ye? Struck dumb, ur ye?... Just the thought of yoo... makes me shtop... before I begin – sing up, ye cunt – cause I've got yooo... under me shkin...*"

Up to this point, the voices had just been part of the background, like the drone of a bee or the rumble of a distant train. Now I had to focus on the sounds from the shelter. The wind ruffled a couple of pages in my book. I steadied it with my arm, in case they overheard.

"Who sang that?" she croaked.

“Me! Silly bastart!” he snorted. “Did ye no see ma mooth movin’, eh?”

“Naw, ah didnae mean just noo. Ah meant who wis it that sang it, ye know?”

“Me! It wis me! Watch, watch ma mooth. *I’ve got yoo* –see, it’s me – *under ma shkin...* That’s me singing, ye fat slug... *deep in the huart of me...* Who did ye think it wis, eh?”

“It’s no’ your song. Somebody else’s.”

“It wisnae onybody else! Christ! It wis me! Me!”

“Oh, well, ay... but...”

“Hoo about this wan, ye’ll like it... haud on, here we go... *O... O... my love is like a red red rose... that’s newly sprung in June* –ah ken them aw, hen – *like a melodee... that’s sweetly played in tune...* C’mon, sing wi’ me.”

“Ah cannae sing.”

“Ay, ye can. ye wur singing like a lintie las’ night, ah heard ye. Sing! C’mon, sing ye fucker. Gies a song.”

“Ah cannae sing.”

“Coorse ye can. Luk, ah’ll stert ye aff. You join in, OK? Will ye dae that fur me, eh? C’mon... *I’ve got yoo...* that’s it, great... *under ma shkin...*”

I turned over onto my back, rested my head on the suddenly unimportant book and stared at the sky. His pseudo-mid-Atlantic pub drawl bludgeoned over the gardens, a stark contrast to her monotone croak, like nails scratching on a blackboard. What a waste of time. Here I was trying to swot up psychiatric nursing and being forced to listen to this pair of lunatics. I couldn’t even escape, run away. If I stood up they might see me. The only alternative route was to crawl along behind the hedge for a hundred yards, until out of sight, but knowing my luck I’d probably be seen by the Charge Nurse and severely lectured on setting a bad example to the inmates. All I could do was wait.

A lull in the conversation allowed my mind to recall last night. She had been furious, my wife. Big with child though she was, I could have punched her. I had tried to study but she kept moaning at me for ignoring her. Then, when I put the book away and tried to be friendly, she pushed me off, told me not to touch her. That annoyed me a bit and I told her she was being unreasonable, but she just laughed, said I should act like a man for once, get drunk, beat her up, not sit reading all the time. When I protested, she became hysterical. She threw some of my lecture notes into the sink where her tights were soaking, like brown mountains rising up through soapy clouds. Naturally I jumped up to rescue them but bumped the table and the milk bottle landed in her lap, soaking her. It was an accident, but she became incoherent, screeching and yelling, hurling things at me, knocking everything over. It took me a long time to tidy up when she finally went to bed. Women are so unpredictable, a real problem. I only want to live in harmony, but don’t know how. No wonder I like my work so much; everything is so simple.

His voice came again. “Listen, hen, let’s dae yon ither wan, eh? C’mon...*O...O... my love is like a red red rose* - haud that, gonnae? – *that’s newly sprung* – tighter, haud it tighter, it’ll no snap – *in June* –move yer haun up ‘n’ doon – *O... O... my love* – dae ye like that, eh? – *like a melodee* – faster, faster – *that’s sweetly played* –Christ, ah could get ma fist in there – *in tune* – keep singing, keep singing – *and fair art thou* – put it in, naw right in – *my bonny lass* – that’s us, we’re away – *sae deep in love...*”

I parted the hedge gently. We had seen them together so often that we suspected something was going on but nothing was ever seen to happen. Until now. She lay back, her skirt rolled up to

her waist. He lay on top, his coat opened from the waist down. One of her legs dangled, her foot swinging rhythmically. They sang together, both bodies moving steadily, copulating to a love song. As a nurse, I should have stopped them, for it's against the rules. But I was fascinated and amused. They were oblivious to everything except the cocoon of the shelter and themselves. The urge to laugh gave way to a feeling of disgust; they were both so wretched, acting like animals. With some surprise I found myself envying them their ignorant freedom, but as the movements and the singing quickened I began to hate him. Rage boiled inside me. He had it all too easy, without complications. I let the hedge close out the final act of the love scene.

"That wis nice," she said. "Who sang it?"

"Fur fucksake, wumin! Whit dae ye mean? See ma lips, watch... are ye watching... O... O... *my love...*"

"Naw, who made the record? It wisnae you, it wis yon big fella, cannae mind his name."

"It wis me that did it! Ye don't think it wis yon big ponce in the kilt, dae ye? Fur fucksake, McKellar's just an ugly big idiot. Cannae sing fur toffee. It wis me, ah telt ye, me!"

"No' your voice. Oan the record. No' the same."

"Ah, Jesus! Coorse it's no the same! Ye didnae expect me tae sing like this – *Ma luv is like a rid rid rose* – did ye, eh? That's no ma recordin' voice, is it?"

"Dunno."

"You must be fuckin' mad. Naebody'd buy that! The public kens whit it likes. Ye've goat tae huv the right image, eh? That big turd's just ma front man. Ye've goat tae sound right, though, and that's me, no' him. Listen...O... O... *my love is like a red red rose...*"

His voice, almost strangled with politeness, slubbed over the hedge, skimmed low over the gardens to the railway line that skirts the grounds of the hospital and was lost in the shimmering heat. From the river, hidden by the city, a boat returned an answering belch.

A grey cloud, vividly three-dimensional, had heaved in front of the sun. As I watched, it seemed to come alive. The frayed edges gave up tufts of individual white which made a brief soar, a transient dash for a separate identity before wilting and evaporating under the heat from the hidden sun. Like lemmings, small brushstroked tore away continually, always meeting the same fate, never surviving on their own, away from the main body. There seemed no point to it all. My theoretical textbook fluttered in the breeze, abandoned and useless.

"Ah'll sing ye wan o' ma new songs... *Imagine there's no heaven... it's easy if you try...*"

"He's deid. Ah read it in the paper."

"Ye shouldnae believe everything ye read in the papers... *No hell below us... above us only sky...*"

"But he's deid."

"*Imagine no possessions... I wonder if you can...*"