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THE FUTURE'S COMING EVERYWHERE

CANDICE



IT'S HARD to find a library. They're not burnt – but if you find one, they are warm. Conrad spends his days there, sleeps, reads manuscripts and eats. Better than a hostel, better than the street.

What fun the old guys had – proud and sneaky, cynical and loyal. The name, the place – it bound you, gave you a side ... to be on, or to plot against. Plotting – that makes you, most everyone, a spy: the boss needs you, so you can scream at him, have huffs and loves, sleep on the heather, drink the hooch, take a musket ball full in the face.... The causes? Here, all are obscured, abstruse, odd: labyrinths. In other worlds, it still goes on, the monarchy, the faith, heads lopped and bodies hung.

That's our past, as we read the record – and someone's future.

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The journal, the manuscript, says: 'I must acknowledge that I have not been brede a schollar; nor can I put this in a true stile...'

'That's the so-called Major, so-called "of Castle Leathers": really, neither rank nor house. Can't make much of that,' Conrad thinks. 'No new edition there, no masterpiece ... those wordy

Scots! the Latin, the bad French, intrigues....’

‘An amateur spy, like almost all of us, for little money, just to live, to be near a secret, a confidence, false friends, carrying something dangerous – a packet, our mortality, juggling with it and what we might not discover, since it probably won’t exist.’

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‘Politics? Sex? Drugs? We’re supposed to have had all that, and now be connoisseurs of booze,’ says Conrad. ‘Where are we headed? No one believes in anything their parents did. No heaven and no hell. No nation and no friends. A false nation, rather – invisible, voices bodiless. People with other origins – they have someone to cling to, maybe.... But even they – there’s so many villages, so many clans to come from, indelible sticky stuff, custom-designed bird-lime ... they don’t adhere to any of the rest.’

‘The tolerance we claim – it’s a veneer, a way of making vapid gatherings,’ says his pal, Paolo. ‘When some threat appears – they’re all getting ready for a Hitler: a good death in a structure, whether it’s a regiment or a hospice. Everybody dies, the song says: so long as your side has an anthem, a parade.... Someone to hold your hand and tell you you’ve done good. Everywhere – it’s the same. The Russians and the Yanks – it’s “me first” everywhere.’ He’s gripping Conrad’s arm

in case he moves away.

‘Yes, I agree. It’s the coming of the end. The candle flares before the finish, brighter, quicker – dies. If it all can’t go on, can’t go further – it’s best call it a day. Enough. Start selling off, and pulling down,’ Conrad says, looking for the door.

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It’s a little false. Everyone says these things, everyone agrees. There’s no impact. After, Conrad goes with Paolo to what they call the ‘gym’: for mental press-ups.

‘We should wear our togas, our togas, tonight,’ the organiser says. ‘Let’s try to get to that deeper level.’

They stand around, draped. Could be desert Arabs, or kids playing with some sheets. There’s a coloured ball – you bounce it to someone you want to hear speak, or you throw it at someone who interrupts. That’s copied from somewhere where that’s done.

‘Your husband – he was inarticulate. That’s why he did those paintings. They say nothing,’ Conrad tells his old friend Émilie.

‘They’re much admired, and beautiful. Significant people have written tributes,’ she says.

‘What’s more to say? Tributes? He escaped, he isn’t dead. He’s gone on being beautiful, and staging all the past, as if it really matters, running it all through again. This time, with a knowing

smirk,’ Conrad says. ‘All painting now’s a requiem and an exhumation.’

‘Well, what’s new? Secret services and new age stuff. It’s all the rage. Lovely bodies turning to spiritual perfection, swapping brains. What a bore,’ she says. ‘Everything’s a dull party – like this one.’

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Get someone in the bed, a body in all its seasons. You play the animal to show you aren’t, that you are human. Another body, a different taste and smells, lies down beside, too tired to sleep...

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‘Dance! Dance with the person beside you, we’ll all twist and twirl,’ the organiser shouts. ‘Spin! Spin like cotton bobbins! Things will go wavery, dissolve ... it’s good! That’s how it should be. Keep it up there, as long as you can.’

‘You work for nothing,’ Conrad says to Émilie. ‘And then perhaps it turns into a job, and you get paid. But then you have to put out lies. I read old stuff, and broadcast the odd bits. There’s this spy, centuries ago, a bendy trail ... then stories of a boozy trek – people love that... They were all naive then, like dogs.... Then, it all took off. It got to where we are: the massacres and the inventions, long lives, boredom ... short lives

and oblivion. Now we know: it speeded up, too quick, too desperate. It's like way back – you knew the play was ending because the horses snuffled outside – the carriages, drawn up for home....' Conrad knows he can say anything to Émilie – she doesn't listen, doesn't care: 'The play ends anyway,' he says, 'The horses aren't a part.'

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'If you're a fugitive, the countryside looks vast, the people indifferent and uninformed. It isn't so,' Conrad tells Paolo. 'There's spies everywhere, ready to tell a tale, and fetch a party, a militia.... You should assume that everyone's a spy, outsiders, insiders too. Best turn everybody in, strangers, or just neighbours absent for a while.'

'Then came roads and telephones,' says Paolo, playing along. 'This century, running doesn't work.'

'Real voices, they existed already, and much better than a telephone,' Conrad says. 'They'd cut your head off, and no "ahh and ugh". It was the only way you wouldn't rise again. No mark set upon your grave, if grave you got.'

'There's always a regime. Those are the oldest things,' Paolo says.

'That country, that Scottish countryside – was a history of hamlets, of places with no one; but to

sell land it has to have a name; mills and their streams, forced betrothals, early deaths ... the crows, who know the future. Then the rest, the other birds,' says Conrad. 'It's the northland – there's water everywhere. A tiny settlement is possible, is best. The south is different, they had cities, round a well, a river. Another kind of planet.'

'Going for centuries – all you needed to know at the start, and then at the finish, just the same. Unless you were invaded,' Paolo says, tagging along...

'It was terrible, of course,' says Conrad. 'A tyranny of little things, small lies, tiny people – a priest, a fear, a lord, a usurer, a husband, father, crazy crones and seers ... you fell down in the field and died, or a cow breathed in your face, gave you idiocy with boils... See the corpses in chains at the crossroads ... looks like you, Paolo. And me. Reactionary? you say. Returning somehow to what was? That has no appeal for me. We're moiling in the spate, Paolo, it's useless wishing you could die of thirst...'

The old villagers can't do poetry, they must put it in their lives. No old movies left, no sound, no sepia. You find the treatments, the sketches, in the court record, the land registry, no one knows who they were, poets, assassins, what they looked like, they'd be a few frames, no continuity, no character, no context, no lapse of time, no whiting of hair, the clothes change while

you glance – families, expedients, a dash for somewhere like a vole, a stoat, a flash in the undergrowth – if you don't get eaten, you're disappeared for ever.

They did nothing for themselves – there was deportation. Clearances. Epidemics: joining a regiment to go and kill southerners, mostly. Where there are battles, not wars, things end quick. But, there's civil massacres ... after battles lost.

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'You're not getting into depth,' the organiser tells Conrad.

'Maybe I'm getting whatever's the opposite,' says Conrad. 'Is it as precious? You know what you want of us, Lidia, but not what we want. I for one – have no idea. When I stop bothering, I'll say, "that's it". That's experience, the common state, known, done with, finished. We speak, communicate – we understand, and so – nothing we are or say is ours, special, unique. Then – you go "croak". Made in someone's grinning image, a toad's grimace, squashed by the years.'

How can you react to that? Lidia doesn't try.

'We have partners now,' says Conrad, 'as if we're panning for gold or founding Macy's. My partner's gone. She said, "You're a person, Conrad, who'll never get a medal for anything.'

Not for anything at all. Not even ‘best dog in show’.”

‘Oh, I see what she means,’ says Lidia. ‘It’s her turn now, so off you go! You should be a big monster, Conrad. You’d know then why people treat you as they do – but you’re a small monster. The treacherous kind.’

‘I need a bed,’ says Conrad. ‘With electricity, where I can stay for months, then leave, not paying.’

‘No, Conrad,’ Lidia says, ‘staying with me would not be ethical.’

She softens her voice, avoids the hand touch that should come with that. ‘You’re full of anomalies, my dear,’ she says. ‘Your search for justice: that follows great unpunished violence. Equality – comes after wars. Fraternity – found only in war, in the trenches, in flight, in marching in allegro time.... Your unchanging village – repressive – perpetuates the disasters you deplore – the famines, the rivalries, the sickness, the ignorance unto death, the bullying.... You must look elsewhere, Conrad – not in what you think you know, desire.... That only brings its opposite.’

‘I didn’t know that’s what I want,’ Conrad says. ‘I’m thirty, Lidia – the good days are past, the brain, the heart – they are mature, ready to drop off the tree. I’ve a biography: already I’ve a past, I can look back, as if there’s been an itinerary... That’s what my parents thought – they

wandered. Before that – no journey, just heads down for the struggle. Now – you can't do anything with us, Lidia...'

'That's your problem,' Lidia says. 'Not mine. I don't touch you. Think! Think about the future...'

'It's always being talked about,' says Conrad. 'The experts! But that's not the future – it's the present; that is all we know ... it always is. Anyway, Paolo will stay with you. He loves the music – “waiting for the golden light” – that's the line, that's what he wants.'



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