

Two Ships · T. Coraghessan Boyle

I SAW HIM TODAY. At the side of the road, head down, walking. There were the full-leafed trees, the maples, elms and oaks I see every day, the snarl of the wild berry bushes, sumac, milkweed and thistle, the snaking hot macadam road, sun-flecked shadows. And him. An apparition: squat, bow-legged, in shorts, T-shirt and sandals, his head shaved to the bone, biceps like legs of lamb. I slowed with the shock of seeing him there, with the recognition that worked in my ankles and fingertips like sap, and for a stunned second or two I stared, fixated, as the car pulled me closer and then swept past him in a rush. I was dressed in white, on my way to crack stinging serves and return treacherous backhands in sweet arcing loops. He never looked up.

When I got home I made some phone calls. He was back in the country—legally—the government forgiving, his mind like damaged fruit. Thirty-one years old, he was staying with his parents, living in the basement, doing god knows what—strumming a guitar, lifting weights, putting pieces of wood together—the things he'd been doing since he was fourteen. Erica listened as I pried information from the receiver, a cigarette in the corner of her mouth, polished surfaces behind her.

I was pouring Haig & Haig over a hard white knot of ice cubes. The last of my informants had got off the subject of Casper and was filling me in on the pains in her neck, lips, toes and groin as I cradled the receiver between ear and shoulder. The smile I gave Erica was weak. When the whiskey-cracked voice on the other end of the line paused to snatch a quick breath, I changed the subject, whispered a word of encouragement and hung up.

"Well?" Erica was on her feet.

"We've got to move," I said.

I was overdramatizing. For effect. Overdramatizing because humor resides in exaggeration, and humor is a quick cover for alarm and bewilderment. I *was* alarmed. He could stay indefinitely, permanently. He could show up at the tennis courts, at the lake, at my front door. And then what would I do? Turn my back, look through him, crouch behind the door and listen to the interminable sharp intercourse of knuckle and wood?

"Is it really that bad?" Erica said.

I sipped at my scotch and nodded. It was really that bad.

Twelve years ago we'd been friends. Close friends. We'd known each other from the dawn of consciousness on. We played in the cradle, in the schoolyard, went to camp together, listened to the same teachers, blocked and batted for the same teams. When we were sixteen we declared war on the bourgeois state and its material and canonical manifestations. That is, we were horny adolescents sublimating glandular frustrations in the most vicious and mindless acts of vandalism. We smoked pot, gulped stolen vodka and drove our parents' cars at a hundred miles an hour. Each night we cruised the back streets till three or four, assaulting religious statues, churches, the slick curvilinear windshields of Porsches and Cadillacs. Indiscriminate, we burned crosses and six-pointed stars. We tore down fences, smashed picture windows, filled jacuzzis with sand. Once we climbed a treacherous three-hundred foot cliff in utter darkness so we could drop raw eggs on the patrons of the chic restaurant nestled at its base. We committed secretive acts of defiance the way Crazy Horse counted coup. We lacked perspective.

Casper saw the whole thing as a crusade. He was given to diatribe, and his diatribes had suddenly begun to bloom with the rhetoric of Marxism. We would annihilate a dentist's plaster lawn ornaments—flamingoes and lantern-wielding pickaninnies—and he'd call it class warfare. Privately, I saw our acts of destruction as a way of pissing in my father's eye.

We ran away from home at one point—I think we were fourteen or fifteen—and it was then that I had my first intimation of just how fanatical and intransigent Casper could be. I'd never considered him abnormal, had never thought about it. There was his obsession with the bodily functions, the vehement disgust he felt over his parents' lovemaking—I *could hear them*, he would say, his features pinched with contempt, *grunting and slobbering, humping like pigs*—the fact that he went to a shrink twice a week. But none of this was very different from what other fifteen-year-olds did and said and felt, myself included. Now, running away, I saw that Casper's behavior went beyond the pale of wise-guyism or healthy adolescent rebellion. I recognized the spark of madness in him, and I was both drawn to it and repelled by it. He was serious, he was committed, his was the rapture of saints and martyrs, both feet over the line. He went too far; I drew back from him.

We'd planned this excursion with all the secrecy and precision of prison-breakers. Twenty miles away, tucked deep in the leafy recesses of Fahnstock State Park, was a huge cache of canned food, an axe, two six-packs of Jaguar malt liquor, sleeping bags and a tent. We signed in at school, ducked out the back door, hitch-hiked the twenty miles, and experienced freedom. The following day, while we were exploring the park, my father stalked up to the campsite (my brother had broken down under interrogation and given us away) and settled down to wait. My father is a powerful and unforgiving man. He tapped a birch switch against a rock for an hour, then packed up everything he could carry—food, tent, sleeping bags, canteens—and hiked out to the highway. The sight of the barren campsite made my blood leap. At first I thought we were in the wrong spot, the trees all alike, dusk falling, but then Casper pointed out the blackened circle of rocks we'd cooked a triumphant dinner over the night before. I found my father's note pinned to a tree. It was curt and minatory, the script an angry flail.

Casper refused to give in. Between us we had \$4.20. He dragged me through swamps and brambles, the darkening stalks of the trees, past ponds, down hills and out to the highway. Afraid to hitch—my father could be glaring behind each pair of headlights—we skirted the road and made our way to a clapboard grocery where we purchased a 25 pound bag of Ken-L Ration. Outside, it was 29°F. We hiked back up into the woods, drank from a swamp, crunched the kibbled nuggets of glyceryl monostearate and animal fat preserved with BHA, and slept in our jackets. In the morning I slipped away, walked out to the road and hitch-hiked back home.

The State Police were called in to track Casper down. They employed specially-trained trackers and bloodhounds. Casper's parents hired a helicopter search team for \$85 an hour. The helicopter spotted Casper twice. Whirring, kicking up a cyclone, the machine hovered over the treetops while Casper's mother shouted stentorian pleas through a bullhorn. He ran. Two weeks later he turned up at home, in bed, asleep.

It was just after this that Casper began to talk incessantly of repression and the police state. He shuffled round the corridors at school with a huge distended satchel full of poorly-printed pamphlets in faded greens and grays: *The Speeches of V. I. Lenin*, *State And Anarchy*, *Das Kapital*. The rhetoric never appealed to me, but the idea of throwing off the yoke, of discounting and discrediting all authority, was a breath of fresh air.

He quit college at nineteen and went to live among the revolutionary

workers of the Meachum Brothers Tool & Die Works in Queens. Six months later he was drafted. How they accepted him or why he agreed to report, I'll never know. He was mad as a loon, fixated in his Marxist-Leninist phase, gibbering non-stop about imperialist aggressors and the heroic struggle of the revolutionary democratic peoples of the Republic of Vietnam. It was summer. I was living in Lake George with Erica and he came up for a day or two before they inducted him.

He was worked up—I could see that the minute he got off the bus. His feet shuffled, but his limbs and torso danced, elbows jerking as if they were wired, the big knapsack trembling on his back, a cord pulsing under his left eye. He was wearing a cap that clung to his head like something alive, and the first thing he did was remove it with a flourish to show off his bald scalp: he'd shaved himself—denuded himself—every hair plucked out, right down to his mustache and eyebrows. From the neck up he looked like a space invader; from the neck down, rigidly-muscled, he was Charles Atlas.

He couldn't stop talking. Couldn't sit down, couldn't sleep, couldn't eat. Said he was going into the army all right, but that he'd do everything in his power to subvert them, and that when they shipped him to Vietnam he'd turn his weapon on his own platoon and then join the NLF. I tried to joke with him, distract him—if only for a moment. But he was immovable. He played his one note till Erica and I just wanted to jump into the car and leave him there with the house, the books, the stereo, everything. Someone pulled a knife out of my ribs when he left.

I never saw him again. Until today.

Rumor had it that he'd disappeared from Fort Dix the first week. He was in Canada, he was in Sweden. The Finns had jailed him for entering the country illegally, the Swiss had expelled him. He was in Belize City stirring up the locals, the British had got hold of him and the U.S. was pressing for his extradition. Rumors. They sifted back to me through my mother, friends, people who claimed they'd seen him or talked to someone who had. I was in law school, student deferred. There were exams, the seasons changed, Erica visited on weekends and there were long breathy phone calls in between. In my second year, the packages began to show up in my mailbox. Big, crudely-bundled manuscripts—manuscripts the size of phonebooks—sent from an address in London, Ontario.

There were no cover letters. But then cover letters would have been

superfluous: the moment I saw the cribbed scrawl across the flat surface of the first package (lettering so small it could only have been written with the aid of magnification), I knew who had sent it. Inside these packages were poems. Or rather loosely organized snatches of enjambed invective in strident upper case letters:

THE FASCIST NAZI ABORTIONIST LOBBY THAT FEEDS
ON THE TATTERED FLESH OF ASIAN ORPHANS
MUST BE CIRCUMVENTED FROM ITS IMPERIALIST
EXPANSIONIST DESIGN
TO ENSLAVE THE MASSES AND TURN ARTIFICIALLY
NATIONALIZED
PROLETARIANS AGAINST BROTHER AND SISTER
PROLETARIANS
IN THE INTERNECINE CONFLICT THAT FEEDS
THE COFFERS
OF THE REVISIONIST RUNNING DOGS
OF BOURGEOIS COMPLACENCY!

The poems went on for hundreds of pages. I couldn't read them. I wondered why he had sent them to me. Was he trying to persuade me? Was he trying to justify himself, reach out, recapture some sympathy he'd deluded himself into thinking we'd once shared? I was in law school. I didn't know what to do. Eventually, the packages stopped coming.

Erica and I married, moved back to Westchester, built a house, had a daughter. I was working in a law firm in White Plains. One night, two a.m., the phone rang. It was Casper. "Jack," he said, "it's me, Casper. Listen, listen, this is important, this is vital—" Phone calls in the night. I hadn't spoken to him in seven years, gulfs had opened between us, I was somebody else—and yet here he was, with the same insistent, demanding voice that wraps you up in unasked for intimacies like a boa constrictor, talking as if we'd just seen one another the day before. I sat up. He was nearly crying.

"Jack: you've got to do something for me, life and death, you got to promise me—"

"Wait a minute," I said, "wait, hold on—" I didn't want to hear it. I was angry, puzzled, I had to be at work in five and a half hours.

"Just this one thing, you know me, right? Just this: if anybody asks,

you stick up for me, okay? No, no: I mean tell them I'm all right, you know what I mean? That I'm good. There's nothing wrong with me, understand?"

What could I say? The phone went dead, the room was dark. Beside me, in bed, Erica shifted position and let out a sigh that would have soothed all the renegades in the world.

I was busy. The incident slipped my mind. Three days later a man in an elaborately buckled and belted trenchcoat stepped into the ante-room at Hermening & Stinson, the firm that had given me my tenuous foothold in the world of corporate law. No one paid much attention to him until he announced that he was from the FBI and that he wanted to speak with me. The typist stopped typing. Charlie Hermening looked up at me like a barn owl scanning the rafters. I shrugged my shoulders.

The man was big and fleshy and pale, his irises like water, wisps of white hair peeping out from beneath the fedora that gripped his head like an animal. When I showed him into my office he flashed his credentials, and I remember wondering if TV producers had studied FBI men, or if FBI men had learned how to act from watching TV. He took a seat, but declined to remove either his hat or trenchcoat. Was I acquainted with a Casper R. Hansen, he wanted to know. Did I know his whereabouts? When had I seen him last? Had he telephoned, sent anything in the mail? What did I think of his mental state?

"His mental state?" I repeated.

"Yes," the man said, soft and articulate as a professor, "I want to know if you feel he's mentally competent."

I thought about it for a minute, thought about Lake George, the poems, Casper's tense and frightened voice over the phone. I almost asked the FBI man why he wanted to know: was Casper in trouble? Had he done something illegal? I wanted to gauge the man's response, listen for nuances that might give me a clue as to what I should say. But I didn't. I simply leaned across the desk, looked the man in the eye, and told him that in my estimation Casper was seriously impaired.

That was a year ago. I'd forgotten the man from the FBI, forgotten Casper. Until now. Now he was back. Like a slap in the face, like a pointed finger: he was back.

"What are you afraid of?" Erica said. "That he'll say hello or shake your hand or something?"

It was dark. Moths batted against the screens, I toyed with my asparagus crepes and spinach salad. The baby was in bed. I poured another glass of French Colombar. “No,” I said, “that’s not it.” And then: “Yes. That would be bad enough. Think of the embarrassment.”

“Embarrassment? You were friends, you grew up together.”

“Yes,” I said. That was the problem. I sipped at the wine.

“Look, I’m not exactly thrilled about seeing him either—the weekend at Lake George was enough to last me a lifetime—but it’s not the end of the world or anything . . . I mean nothing says you’ve got to invite him over for dinner so he can lecture us on the wisdom of Mao Tse Tung or tell us how miserable he is.”

She was in the kitchen area, spooning the foam off a cup of cappuccino. “Are you afraid he’ll vandalize the house—is that it?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I mean we’re not kids any more—he’s not that crazy.” I thought about it, listening to the hiss of the coffee maker. The house we’d put up was pretty cozy and dramatic. Modern. With decks and skylights and weathered wood and huge sheets of glass. It called attention to itself, stylish and unique, a cut above the slant-roofed cottages that lined the road. It was precisely the sort of house Casper and I had sought out and violated when we were sixteen. I looked up from my wine. “He might,” I admitted.

Erica looked alarmed. “Should we call the police?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, we can’t—” I broke off. It was futile. I wasn’t really afraid of that sort of thing—no, my fears went deeper, deeper than I wanted to admit. He would look at me and he would condemn me: I’d become what we’d reacted against together, what he’d devoted his mad, misguided life to subverting. That was the problem. That’s why I didn’t want to see him at the tennis courts or at the lake or even walking along the road with his shoulders hunched under the weight of his convictions.

“Hey,” she was at my side, massaging the back of my neck, “why not forget about it—you’ve got enough worries as it is.” She was right. The EPA was filing suit against one of our clients—a battery company accused of dumping toxic waste in the Hudson—and I’d been poring over the regulations looking for some sort of loophole. I was meeting with Charlie Hermening in the morning to show him what I’d come up with.

“You know something—didn’t Rose say he’d been back nearly a month already?” She was purring, the cappuccino smelled like a feast,

I could feel the alcohol loosening my knotted nerves. "And you only saw him today for the first time? If he was going to come over, wouldn't he have done it by now?"

I was about to admit she was right, finish my coffee and take a look at the newspaper, when there was a knock at the door. A knock at the door. It was 9:30. I nearly kicked the table over. "I'm not here," I hissed. "No matter who it is," and I slipped into the bedroom.

There were voices in the hallway. I heard Erica, and then the polite but vaguely querulous tones of—a woman?—and then Erica's voice, projecting: "Jack. Jack, will you come out here, please?"

Mrs. Shapiro, our next door neighbor, was standing in the doorway. "Sorry to bother you," the old woman said, "but your garbitch is all over the driveway—I can't even get the car through."

Garbage? Her driveway was at least fifty feet from ours. What was she talking about?

The night was warm, redolent of flowers and grass clippings. There was a moon, and the crickets seemed to be serenading it, chirring in the trees like a steel band locked in a groove. I walked beside Mrs. Shapiro to where her car sat rumbling and sputtering, lights flooding the gumbo of vegetable peels, papers, milk cartons and diapers strewn across her driveway. The cans had been deliberately hauled down the street, upended and dumped—no dog or raccoon could have been so determined or efficient. This was deliberate. As I bent to the mess, I thought of Casper.

"Kids." Mrs. Shapiro, arms folded, stood silhouetted against the headlights. She spat the word out as if she were cursing. "Things just seem to get worse and worse, don't they?"

I worked in silence, embarrassed, digging into the slop with my bare hands, trying not to think about baby stool, maggots, the yielding wet paste of coffee grounds and canteloupe shells, scooping it up by the armload. When I was finished I told Mrs. Shapiro that I'd have Erica hose down the driveway for her in the morning. The elderly woman merely raised her hand as if to say forget about it, tumbled into the carseat and set the car in motion with a shriek of the steering mechanism and a rumble of rotten exhaust. I watched the taillights trace the arc of her driveway, then hauled the garbage cans back to my own yard, all the while expecting Casper to pop out at me with a laugh. Or maybe

he was crouching in the bushes, giggling to himself like a half-witted adolescent. That was about his speed, I thought.

Inside, I washed up, fumed at Erica—"It was deliberate," I kept saying, "I know it was"—and then shut myself up in the study with the brief I'd prepared on the battery manufacturer. I couldn't read a word of it. After awhile—it must have been twenty minutes or so—I heard Erica getting ready for bed—running water, brushing her teeth—and then the house went silent. I knew I should go over the brief a couple of times, have a mug of hot Ovaltine and get a good night's rest. But I was rooted to the chair, thinking about Casper—a grown man, thirty-one years old—sneaking around in the dark, dumping peoples' garbage. What could he be thinking of?

A muffled sound was pulsing through the house. At first it didn't register, and then, with a flash of anger, I realized what it was: someone was knocking at the door. This was too much. If there was garbage in the neighbors' driveway they could damn well clean it up themselves, I thought, storming down the hallway. I wrenched the door back, expecting Mrs. Shapiro.

It was Casper.

He stood there, his head bowed, the moon blanching the stiff bristle of his crown. He was wearing a sleeveless T-shirt, shorts, sandals. The veins stood out in his arms. When he looked up at me his eyes were soft and withdrawn. "Jack," was all he said.

I was at a loss. The worst possible scenario was playing itself out on my doorstep, and I was caught up in it, against my will, suddenly forced to take a part. I felt like an unrehearsed actor shoved out onstage, I felt exhausted and defeated. My initial impulse had been to slam the door shut, but now, with Casper standing there before me, I could only clear my throat, wipe my features clean and ask him in.

He hesitated. "No," he said, "no, I couldn't do that. I mean, I just came to, to say hello, that's all."

"Don't be silly," I said, insistent, already ushering him in. "Here, the living room. Have a seat. Can I get you something: beer? brandy? Seven-Up?"

We were standing beside each other in the center of the living room. He took in the potted plants, the umbrella tree, the little Paul Klee my mother had given me. The nearest piece of furniture was the loveseat; he perched at the edge of it, apologetic. "No thanks," he said, eyes on the floor.

I was halfway to the kitchen, needing a brandy. "You sure? It's no trouble at all. I've got liqueur—how about a Drambuie?" It had suddenly become crucially important that I give him something, an offering of some sort, a peace pipe, the communal leg of lamb. "Are you hungry? I've got brie and crackers—I could make a sandwich—?"

He was still staring at the floor. "Milk," he said, so softly I wasn't sure I'd heard him.

"You want a glass of milk?"

"Yes, thanks—if it's not too much trouble."

I made some deprecatory noises, poured out a brandy and a milk, arranged some Danish flatbread on a platter around the cheese. Two minutes later we were sitting across the room from one another. I was looking into my brandy snifter, he was studying the glass of milk as if he'd never seen anything like it before. "So," I said, "you're back."

He didn't answer. Just sat there, looking at his milk. There was something monkish about him—perhaps it was the crew cut. I thought of acolytes, nuns, the crop-headed Hare Krishnas in airport lounges. "It's been a long time," I offered. No response. It occurred to me to ask about the garbage cans—perhaps we could share the intimacy of the joke—but then I thought better of it: no sense in embarrassing him or stirring up any rancor.

"About the garbage cans," he said, as if reading my thoughts, "I did it."

I waited for an explanation. He stared at me so fixedly I finally looked away, and more as a means of breaking the silence than satisfying my curiosity, I asked him why.

He seemed to consider this. "I don't know," he said finally, took a tentative sip of milk, then downed the glass in a single gulp. He belched softly and settled back in the chair.

I was losing my patience. I had work in the morning. The last thing I wanted to do was sit here with this wacko, on edge in my own living room, mouthing the little platitudes of social formality when I knew both of us were seething. I made another stab at conversation, just because the silence was so inadmissible. "So," I said, "we've wondered about you from time to time, Erica and I . . . we have a daughter, did you know that? Her name's Tricia."

His arms were rigid, tense with muscle. He was staring down at his interlocked fingers, straining with the tension, as if he were doing an isometric exercise. "I was in the hospital," he said.

The hospital. The syllables bit into me, made something race round the edge of my stomach. I did not want to hear it.

I got up to pour another brandy. "More milk?" I asked, the rigorous host, but he ignored me. He was going to tell me about the hospital. He raised his voice so I could hear him.

"They said it was a condition of giving me a clean slate. You know, they'd rehabilitate me. Eleven months. Locked up with the shit-fingers and droolers, the guys they'd shot up in the war. That was the hospital."

I stood in the kitchen doorway, the brandy in my hand. He was accusing me. I'd started the war, oppressed the masses, wielded the dollar like an axe, I'd deserted him, told the FBI the truth, created the American Nazi Party and erected the slums, stick by stick. What did he want from me—to say I was sorry? Sorry he was crazy, sorry he couldn't go to law school, sorry Marx's venom had eaten away the inside of his brain?

He was on his feet now. The empty glass flashed in his hand as he crossed the room. He handed it to me. We were inches apart. "Jack," he said. I looked away.

"I've got to go now," he whispered.

I stood at the door and watched him recede into the moonlight that spilled across the lawn like milk. He turned left on the macadam road, heading in the direction of his parents' house.

Erica was behind me in her robe, squinting against the light in the hallway. "Jack?" she said.

I didn't hear her. Standing there in the doorway, watching the shadows close like a fist over the lawn, I was already packing.