

THE LOVE OF LOVE

Meet me in the changing rooms, during second period, and I will tell you a story. The changing rooms will be empty, the windows, high up the wall for modesty, will be blank with cloud and the only sounds will be the gurgle and spray of the urinals. We will not be disturbed. There are many corners to duck around if anyone comes. But we will not be disturbed, I promise.

My story concerns Jesse Know. Come look at the graffiti here. You see it says:

Jesse know ducks like the rain.

Ah, but, it has been changed, amended. You will see her name written often throughout the school. Scratched with compasses on black tabletops and within the long lamps in the library, also on locker doors inside and out. Her name will live on, passed down the generations in textbooks and grammars, it will feature in Virgil and Camus and mix with calculus and the annual rainfall on the Amazon basin. If you had seen her riding the 33 bus, as I have done, then you would know why. The uniform of her school, Our Lady of Sorrows, although it had been designed in a surly brown with a mind to chastity had never looked more lewd than it did on Jesse Know. Her pleated grey skirt was no shorter than any other, only rather than making her similar the effect of her uniform was to demonstrate the difference between her and other girls. She exuded contempt. An impossible, unapproachable contempt. Her attitude to uniform, to the idea of uniformity, was palpable.

There were other girls from her school who would take the 33. This bus which carried them over the bridge was the main place that we would get a look at them. Just because we were all boys together you should not presume that we were bold or too ready. The presence of those girls was painful for us. Our places were obvious, the invisible divisions which we had established were based on our peculiar merits: this one a swimmer, this one a scholar, this one a prefect, this one a rower. Suddenly, on the bus, these careful arrangements were thrown into disarray. Just as one set of electrons is dragged out of orbit by the proximity of another and this invisible change will cause iron irrevocably to rust, or a blue crystal to

bloom in a beaker, so we were changed on the bus and our proper positions established.

There were other girls from her school who took the 33 and some of them were even pretty. But none of them caused such silence among us, such fidgeting and looking and looking away. Once she had a paper bag full of flying saucers which she ate one by one without registering their fizz. Although she must have felt it on her tongue she kept it a secret for herself. I hardly dared to look at her and never caught her eye. She stared always out of the window, watching the river, which the clouds turned white as milk.

I never saw her talking to the other girls and I wonder if she had any friends. Perhaps they were as frightened as we were. They must have heard her speak in lessons, but it seems impossibly strange to think of her in lessons, to imagine her instructed by a teacher, or subject to rules. To be at the mercy of a system of merit apart from that which she herself had invented.

Although I longed to, I could not approach her. I whiten at the thought. Although in all my dreams it was me, I knew that I could no more go up to her and speak, than I could fly or breathe underwater. It would take someone braver than me to see it through. Someone bolder with a reputation at stake in the matter. But I was there when Ed Burst, goaded beyond endurance outside the post office, which also sold sweets, went swaggering up to her on the bus. She was sitting down and he was standing, holding onto a pole which gave him a lurching, overhanging look. She did not turn from the window when he came over, even though there was some giggling and he coughed also. It was not until he said, in a voice that he forced down deep:

'Excuse me, but do you know if Barnes is the next stop?'

Now it could not have been plainer that the next stop was Barnes, or that Ed Burst himself knew it must be, since he was wearing our school uniform and everyone knew that our school was in that locale. It was not gawky; it was an impertinence. I was embarrassed for him. It seemed as if she hadn't noticed, she didn't turn but stayed just as she was r staring out

at the river, fixed and immovable. Burst began again, louder this time:

`Excuse me ... `

`I wish you wouldn't talk to me, but should know that my name is Jesse Know.

if you must you That is my name and though you may want to please to never call me sweet, love, poppet or darling one. My name is Jesse Know. If you want to talk to me or touch me later on, then you should know that I take this bus each morning, the 33 F and you will find me here. All you need to do is ask, although I wish you would not.'

And with that she stood, which was enough to cause Burst, in his shock, to give way, to fall back, defeated. There was silence as she shouldered her bag and left the bus. But there was not so much that was amazing in this fact, it was, after all, her stop.

That morning there was much chattering in the halls and corridors. There can only have been six or seven senior boys on the bus, apart from Burst himself, the rest no doubt were juniors, but it was amongst these that the rumours were most virulent. Lacking the experience that might have bounded their imaginings they urged each other on to lies more and more brazen - until it was held as fact that Jesse Know and Ed Burst had had to be forcibly separated and led off the bus by a member of the police force in full uniform.

And if Ed Burst was seen bragging in the atrium that morning he deserves praise for he hid his wound like a Spartan. Coming from one of the stalls, during third period that day, when, as is my custom, I happened to be hiding here, I heard the sound of sobbing. Burst F no doubt, examining his maimed self.

It wasn't long after this that the play was announced. Mr Penny, head of History f and also Drama was to direct Anthony and Cleopatra. The audition times were pinned up on notice boards around the school. For the boys these would take place at one o'clock in the theatre and for the girls they would be at five. For the girls? What girls? We had no girls at our school, more's the pity, but there were none. Where would these girls come from? Where indeed, but from Our Lady or Sorrows? This

innovation, it emerged, had been the subject of much wrangling in staff meetings. The High Master himself was invoked. There was an element within the staff, a faction who represented the old guard, who demanded that the female leads be taken by boys, as they had been all the way back to Marlowe's time. In opposition to these was a progressive faction. The minutes of the meeting refer to 'engenderment of habits, in later life problematic' the High Master's secretary, Mademoiselle Sim, who also doubled up as a language assistante, recording only the facts and not the passion.

Auditions for the part of Anthony were a mere formality. Ed Draper did audition, but without a script his performance of Anthony's final soliloquy bringing tears to Mr Penny's eyes. Ed Draper was tall, gaunt and pale as alabaster. He was, admittedly, rather thin for the part of history's greatest soldier. But, under the careful direction of Mr. Penny, who stayed, late into the night, the sweat showing on his mint green shirt, Draper had taken on Cyrano, Kreon, Faustus, Horner and Coriolanus - and in each case been applauded Victor Teatro. Ed Draper disdained the rugby pitch, smoked in Pinter and was always late. His mother, a gorgeous divorcee, was to be seen in the front row at all his performances and afterwards sharing cigarettes with him in the back seat of her Bentley, while her Hungarian chauffeur waited, lantern-jawed, impassive and separated by glass. Although he was no sportsman Draper was not teased. Appreciation of his dramatic talent spread even beyond Mr. Penny and Mrs. Draper-St. John. Other boys noticed something in the eyes of their own mothers, when they asked about that boy, the tall thin one, that they did not quite understand. It should be pointed out at this juncture, that Mr. Penny was not progressive in all things. He insisted on period costume for period drama. Shakespeare for instance. 'Tights when appropriate' was a motto that he lived by. But it was a measure of Draper's talent that you could not help but see it whatever costume he appeared in.

The day of the girls' audition could hardly have passed unnoticed. The boys leaving at the end of the day were forced to stand back from the narrow iron gate that provided the quickest route to the bus stop. There was no magic, it seemed, that kept the world out - for the girls now came through, giggling, some wheeling

bicycles, holding satchels and even handbags. They did not look from side to side although some touched their long hair or wound it in their fingers as the boys stood back astonished, to let them through. They had thought the ordeal was over when Jesse Know appeared, surprising them on a sudden. Bolder than the rest she even stopped to inspect those stood still nearest the gate, looking them from head to toe before tossing her plaits and moving on, passing no comment save the total contempt that was her manner. It was the start of a turbulent month.

Even poor Mr. Penny was not immune. Cleopatra was cast before she had opened her mouth. She read the script, flatly and without looking up - it made no difference.

I did not sit in on the rehearsals, but the series of licentious linoprints that I was producing for my art coursework frequently required me to stay late after school. Naturally I was often in the toilets. It was here, in the very cubicle in which we now stand that I first heard it. A voice urgent and breathless that sobbed:

'Oh, oh, oh, my love.'

After half past six, the character of this place changes. After half past six, it is no longer a place of cleanliness, but of obscenity - the tinkle and jet of the urinals is not hygienic, but dank. After half past six when all but the corridor lights are switched off, the stench grows and the nude ghosts of sportsmen jostle in their own smell. Who would come to such a place to sob and whisper into the echoing dark:

'Oh my love, my sweet.'

Needless to say that I did not leave off my task to listen, rather I continued with curiosity increased, my senses prickling for lewdness. And I was rewarded too, for, barely perceptible, beneath these words, was the sound of another - a silent second, I knew their breathing, could hear its occasional catch. And it dawned on me in a sudden moment of bright and melting revelation that words I could hear were not those of a fantasist (some morning breaks you could not find an empty cubicle for them), but a real and active participant. Two in fact. Listening now, with a clearer head, I

began to fathom the implications of what I heard. The voice and the near silence began, as it were, to separate, to assume each an individual character. The voice was infinitely, effusively complimentary and it poured its mingled sighs and compliments into an implacable other. I began to pity the voice as its urgency grew - and yet it found no answer it rose from a whisper to a whine and:

'Oh, oh, oh, Jesse, Jesse Know.'

A sudden hissing intake of breath -then silence.

A few seconds passed during which I considered beginning my own task afresh, my young blood quick regroup. But I hadn't long to contemplate this possibility before I was interrupted by a new sound. A peel of laughter, high and sweet and yet awesome in its scorn. A door swung on its hinges, footsteps, hard heels, another door and she was gone. I stood up and hastily buckled my belt, hoping this stricture might quell my outraged senses (in fact it had the opposite effect) and, opening the door a crack, and saw near the far wall, a male figure leaning heavily against one of the rows of lockers. With its rounded shoulders, its face hidden by lank black it hair, this picture of defeat staggered over to the nearest basin to regard itself in the mirror that was fixed there. I saw the tear-stained face of Ed Burst.

Thus it was to be. Each evening she would pass two hours rehearsing love with Ed Draper, before coming down to perform with Ed Burst. I was her devoted fan, I did not miss a single show - and, although I never saw here (for I was too afraid to disturb her, frighten her coming out of their cubicle) I memorised every moment. That silence. That laugh.

To the disappointment of the spinster art-teacher, Miss Clarke, who had taken a keen interest in my lino cutting heretow, my work grew abstract. A perfect white space, the desperate black vainly encroaching. I would go down each night to my cubicle, ten minutes before time, a few choice prints in hand. Only I could read their minute variations. How many times I cut myself in their execution I do not know. I was not the only one in whom this nightly ordeal produced a marked effect. Ed Burst no longer strutted the corridors. Was replaced in his eight because he could not keep

the stroke and fell behind in the cross-country
f only to be discovered at four o'clock, by
Mr. Aitken, the games-master, crying in a
thicket.

And very often from my lookout at in the top of
the art block, I spied a lone figure at the
edge of the furthest of the rugby pitches,
pacing back and forth and smoking furiously. Ed
Draper for all his talent was no less smitten.
Oh too, too quickly those anguished weeks
passed by. It wasn't long before all the
tickets had been sold and a set populated the
blank stage. Mr. Penny had been precise in his
instructions. The marbling had taken hours, and
one had to wonder about the eventual
destination of the mosaic of Draper as Anthony
- it was certainly not something one could
assign to the props room to attract years of
dust and irrelevance

For two days before the show there were no
assignments. Burst and I waited, in our
separate cubicles for two nights in vain. When
I saw him wandering the upper floors during the
daytime, with that haunted, wasted look I
wanted to go to him, to tell him that I was his
brother and felt her cruelty as deeply as he
did. But he did not see me. And anyway, I'm
quite sure that he did not know my name.

On the night of the performance he and I were
the first in the theatre. We sat on opposite
sides of the auditorium listening stoically to
the pipe and tabor group, who relished this,
their only opportunity to play in public,
without earning detentions. Together we watched
the audience file in - a collection of boys,
parents and teachers as well as an unusual
number of single, wealthy-looking men of middle
age. Draper's mother sat in the front row, her
chauffeur beside her, still in his uniform. Her
lips moved silently until the very moment that
curtain rose, a change in the lights hushed the
room's chatter and the play began.

On strode Draper, replete in the false metal
musculature of a Roman general - his short
leather skirt doing nothing to hide the reality
of his tights, inducing a sharp intake of
breath amongst members of the audience both
male and female. Draper's acting was more than
naturalistic - it was supernatural. He did not
represent the person of Anthony, so much as the
idea. He kept the cold flame of ambition always
visible, allowed the occasional access of

boyishness - his features, usually so gaunt and pale, taking on, in light of the theatre, the wholesome angles of a school athlete.

And Jesse Know? She said the lines aloud and she walked back and forth on the stage, but her terrible disdain did not leave her, not for a second. She scorned the play itself and her performance made his performance seem strange and desperate. As though he Mark Anthony, was trying to amuse her, Jesse Know, with his dancing about and speaking. And as the piece progressed, inevitably, towards her doom, he grew more and more transported in his part. And yet she still spoke her lines flatly and was stiffly embraced. At first I was embarrassed for her. But she was magnetic still, I could not prevent the effect she had on my body any more than a compass can stop itself from pointing. But as the play progressed my admiration for Jesse Know, in facing down this audience, facing down this play, also grew. The object of my embarrassment shifted imperceptibly. It was he who seemed desperate, desperate for her to act, to play. Her performance remained perfect and unchanging while he raged more and more. I could hardly bare to watch his growing desperation. His death, when it came, was a relief. Mr Penny had ordered off his armour for the scene - leaving just his coquettish skirt and his lean white body. Eros too, played by a hairless fourth year, stripped to his waist. The two of them covered each other liberally with blood till their skin shone silver in the light. Jesse Know was as unmoved by his death as she had been by all his tragedy. Her own suicide was far less painful - a mere ducking out of the light - in a sense she simply closed her eyes for a few minutes and waited for the lights to go down. Which they did, to rapturous applause.

Draper's mother in the front row had the very hardest job - to look back and forth between them, fixing her with a hateful stare and her boy with a look full of motherly consolation. Mr. Penny was weeping outright and had to be supported. And, looking up, I saw that Ed Burst leading the ovation. Standing full up right on his seat to applaud. As they took their bows Jesse Know smiled her scornful smile, so that I nearly started out of my seat to catch hold of her, to carry her off with me to my cubicle. Ed Draper's eyes were dark and sullen. He had nothing left for a smile.

Of course, the play was not for us. The play was for the parents. For us there was the party. I had obtained the address from one of the lighting men in exchange for a few magazines which I had had the good fortune to find in a skip, in one of Soho's less salubrious alleyways. As the applause continued I went down to the changing room where I put on the outfit I had brought for the purpose. A black polo neck, black jeans, black gym shoes and, to complete my costume, a black balaclava. Appraising myself in the mirror I saw that my disguise was indeed perfect. I looked every inch the stage hand. The anticipation came close to overwhelming me, so that I had to spend a few further minutes in my cubicle, trying over and over to calm myself down.

The house was that of one of the servant girls, also called, in real life, Charmain. It was only a short bicycle ride away, although the journey was rendered arduous by my sensitive state. I arrived to find the party in full swing. Eros was vomiting copiously into the hedge, his eyeliner running like a girl in a cheap magazine. Music rattled the windows in their frames and silhouettes moved on the curtains. The door was open and, donning my balaclava, I went in to observe all I could. A brief survey of the downstairs rooms showed me various minor characters entwined as though in Shakespeare's dream. The objects of my search were not to be found on the ground floor it seemed. Hastily I made my way upstairs. I tried each of the doors in turn, astonishing a young couple and earning myself a place their next day's anecdotes - one boastful, one tragic. It was on the top floor that I found the locked door. Eagerly I squatted down at the keyhole. The quickness of my shaking breath was such that I worried they might hear me. But all three were too absorbed to notice anything apart from that which was immediately before them. I was pleased to note that, while not so talented as Draper, Burst was certainly well-favoured. That Jess Know, magisterial in her immobility forced them into wild competition - so that, despite my youth and enthusiasm I could barely keep pace. She ruled them with commands too quiet for me to hear, which they performed in uneasy cooperation. I cursed my lack of foresight for not bringing more specialised equipment. The camera I had with me proved unequal to the task given the narrowness of the aperture and my shaking hands. And as they rose and fell, the two of them, the sweat

standing out on their necks. I saw them exchange a look of desperation. It was a plea for mercy, for release.

But she would not let them go. I stayed at my post until the light outside began to change. Until the two of them fell away from her, shriveled-up and used. I watched her laugh and I knew I loved her.

It was not long after this that she disappeared. No one saw her on the 33 bus. There was rumour that her parents had sent her to boarding school, but it could never be confirmed.

Ed Draper and Ed Burst never spoke after that. But sometimes I would see them seated opposite one another in the cafeteria. Nursing their soup in silence. In the total silence that was all they had left.