

ALWAYS

There are people and places which exist in bubbles of time. I may be such a person. The British Club was — is — such a place.

Late afternoon. As always, hot. This is a country with no seasons.

The coarse, worn grass of the lower tennis court; mixed doubles; Harry at the net.

—Yours! cries Harry, lunging at my backhand lob. Yours!

The ball hits Harry's racquet and we watch it lift, hang for an instant and float into the rhododendrons.

—Out! says Yvonne, my partner, perhaps unnecessarily.

—Game, set, match, I say. Thank you, Harriet. Thank you, Harry.

But Harry's back is turned to us. He is standing, staring at Harriet.

—Where were you, Harriet? Where were you?

—Oh, God! says Yvonne. Not again.

—Behind you, Harry. On the baseline.

—Where, Harriet?

—On the baseline, Harry. Behind you.

Harriet answers calmly; Harry boils with fury. This is how games of tennis with Harry and Harriet always end. Harry's recriminations; Harriet's patience. Embarrassing to witness. Manifestly unjust. Harriet's tennis is elegant, educated; Harry plays like an enraged turkey. Harriet wins points; Harry loses them. This is how it always is.

Yvonne collects her cigarettes. I follow her off the court and we sit on a rusting garden roller.

—Poor Harriet, I say.

—You feel sorry for her? asks Yvonne, blowing a smoke ring.

— Don't you?

—Why does she tolerate him?

—Because she's his wife?

Yvonne snorts. She has a low opinion of wives having once been one herself. But that, as she sometimes says, was in another incarnation altogether.

When Harry and Harriet join us in the bar, Yvonne and I are finishing a second Singapore Sling and thinking very seriously about a third.

—Anyone for bridge? says Harry.

Yvonne groans but — tennis, gin, bridge — this is how we pass our time.

The British Club is no longer what it must have been in its colonial heyday. The lawns and terraces are returning to the wild; the restaurant opens fitfully; the musty volumes in the library disintegrate on the shelves. But the tennis courts are still in use, the bar does brisk business and the cards room is frequently occupied. More recently, a shallow paddling-pond has been added to the amenities. This was to have been a swimming-pool but the abrupt resignation of Donald Dunne, the Treasurer, and the subsequently-discovered shortage of funds dictated a less ambitious scheme.

To a newcomer, the attractions of the British Club's gloomy rooms and faded furnishings are not obvious but it serves a purpose. I think of it as a retreat from the world's glare, or an unnoticed fold in the fabric of time. When I share this thought with Yvonne, she gives me a look that confirms I should keep such notions to myself.

I doubt if the British Club's original members — those stern servants of the Empire — would approve our present membership. We are no longer exclusive. Jaded Australians, drifting Americans and despondent Scandinavians float freely beside urbane Lebanese, six Brazilian opera singers and an engaging family of Koreans. We have mining engineers, plantation managers, teachers, accountants. No missionaries but this is not a rule. We are very relaxed although, had we known, we might have drawn the line at Harry.

A delay in his travel plans meant that Harriet's arrival pre-dated Harry's by several weeks. She was introduced by a colleague from the local teacher training college where

she lectured. We assumed that the husband, when he arrived, would be in the same mould as the wife. We were wrong. It is not that Harry is disliked exactly but he has an ability to displease. He is adept at discovering a person's deeply-held convictions and disputing them. Although he seldom wounds, he frequently offends. Captain Stone, the Club Secretary, no longer speaks to him.

I smile tightly, hoping my irritation doesn't show.

—Sorry, partner, says Harry, trumping my winner for the second time that round. Just trying something.

I partner Harry when we play bridge. Not from choice. But if ever Harry partners Harriet, the game descends into bitter post-mortems. Harriet plays bridge perfectly efficiently but no one can be expected to interpret Harry's bidding or the logic of his game play. Harriet's failure to understand is seen by Harry as wilful obstruction and provokes him to a frenzy. My own shortcomings he is more willing to forgive.

—Whenever you're ready, Harry, says Yvonne, lighting another cigarette.

—Be with you in a minute, says Harry, studying his hand.

The ceiling fan turns slowly, slowly while we wait.

—Do you see that gecko? I say, indicating the motionless lizard on the wall. Do you see a strong resemblance to Donald Dunne?

—Yes, indeed, says Yvonne. Perhaps our recently-departed Treasurer has been murdered by pirates in the Sulu Sea and been reincarnated as a reptile. Please play a card, Harry.

But Harry has put down his cards.

—What's that? he says.

—Yvonne is suggesting that Donald Dunne has been reincarnated as a lizard, I say.

—Are you believers? he asks.

Yvonne and I look at each other. This may be tricky territory.

—Believers in what? I ask.

—Reincarnation, says Harry.

—It's a rather feeble device for poorly-plotted short stories and hackneyed Hollywood movies, says Yvonne. And it's terribly passé.

Harry ignores her and looks at me.

—I don't know, Harry, I say. I neither believe nor disbelieve. It saves a lot of trouble.

—So you don't have 'memories'?

—Memories?

—Of previous lives.

—No, Harry. Sorry. In fact my memory of this one is often a little hazy.

Harry looks suddenly so crushed that I regret my flippancy.

—Tell me about your 'memories', I say.

Yvonne extinguishes her cigarette and sighs.

—Harriet and I have memories of a dozen different lives, says Harry.

—Harriet has 'memories', too?

—We both have 'memories', says Harry.

To her credit, Yvonne says nothing

While the ceiling fan turns above us and the gecko blinks, Harry recalls a succession of incarnations which terminates with Harry as second butler in an Edwardian country house in Leicestershire.

—A butler? I say.

—Harriet was the housekeeper, says Harry. We've never been famous figures.

Never Oliver Cromwell nor Joan of Arc. But we've always been us.

—Always together?

—Always. Although we have to find each other first which can take years.

—And are you always man and wife? I ask.

Harry looks puzzled.

—Never brother and sister? Or father and daughter?

—Never, says Harry.

Harriet says nothing. Does she believe in their pasts as fervently as Harry? I would like to ask her but it seems indelicate. Almost an invitation to infidelity. Harry picks up his cards and the game continues.

At the end of the evening, Harry takes my arm.

—I'd prefer it if you didn't mention this conversation to anyone, he says. It might be misunderstood and cause Harriet embarrassment. I'm sure you understand.

I'm not sure that I do, but I nod nonetheless.

Following Harry's revelation, nothing changes. Except perhaps that behind the short, round, truculent figure in a faded bush-jacket, I sometimes see a column of other Harrys, in wing-collars, gaiters, jenkins, ruffs, pantaloons, perukes. And always beside him, Harriet.

If you have the impression that nothing much happens at the British Club, you would be correct; but you should understand that the Club's purpose is not excitement. Our calendar has two high-points, however, the first being the annual mixed doubles tennis championship.

In the ballot to decide partners, Harry draws someone's giggly daughter and they are swiftly eliminated. I am fortunate enough to draw Harriet and, during the course of a satisfying day, we proceed smoothly from round to round, triumphing sweetly in the finals. Together we hold up the modest trophy and drink a toast to our worthy opponents.

By this stage, Harry has already drunk several toasts and he drinks several more throughout the evening. When I leave the bar to clear my head, I find him by the paddling-pond in serious mood. For a minute or two we stand in silence.

—You must be very proud of Harriet, I say.

—Ah, says Harry.

—She's a talented tennis-player.

—Yes, Harriet is exceptionally talented. She plays golf quite as well as she plays tennis and she plays badminton better than both. She can crochet, mend fuses, ride a motorbike, speak Italian, Greek and a little Mandarin. She has a first aid badge, a private pilot's licence and she's a cordon bleu cook. Also, he says, raising his eyes to mine, she understands trigonometry.

I search for something to say but nothing occurs to me.

—Ah.

—Exactly, says Harry. Ah. I let Harriet down, you see. I always have done. It's difficult to live with.

—I'm sure Harriet doesn't think you let her down, I say.

—There's only one thing Harriet can't do, says Harry. She can't swim. Isn't that odd?

—Yes, Harry, I say. Very odd.

And together we stare into the shallow water of the paddling-pond.

Our second high-point is the reception held to celebrate the Sovereign's official birthday. A buffet supper is laid out on starched tablecloths in the library, and a mix of nationalities discover an enthusiasm for the British Crown. We are addressed by a frail, white-haired gentleman who enjoys some enigmatic consular status and who appears at no other time of the year. The loyal toast is followed by a rush to the bar and the celebrations continue.

Wearing an array of unusual medals which no one asks him to identify, Harry — spurred on perhaps by patriotism — makes himself unusually agreeable to everyone.

—You know, says Captain Stone, the Club Secretary, Harry really isn't such a bad type. He looks at me with kindly reproach. I think you may have misjudged him.

I cannot recall judging or misjudging Harry. Indeed it's my practice to judge no one in the innocent hope that no one will judge me. But I say nothing. Instead I help myself

to more of the British Club's vintage Armagnac which only appears on these occasions. The rest of the evening passes perfectly peacefully until I find myself being shaken vigorously by Yvonne.

—Wake up, she says. Come at once. Something shocking's happened.

Reluctantly, I follow Yvonne across the croquet lawn to the paddling-pond. There we come upon a small group which includes Captain Stone and Dr Kumar, our local medical man. They are looking down at the fully-clothed body of a woman: Harriet.

—She's been in the water for several hours, says Dr Kumar.

—The pond's no more than eighteen inches deep, says Captain Stone. How could she drown?

—Either she fell in and passed out, says Dr Kumar, or else she passed out and fell in. That's all I can say. Dr Kumar does not approve of alcohol.

—Has anyone told Harry?' says Yvonne.

No one has. It is agreed that I am the right person to undertake the mission. I can't think why.

Harry and I stand together at the paddling-pond. Harry shows no outward signs of distress. Grief affects people differently. We remain silent for several minutes while I try to think of something suitable to say.

—It must be comforting to know that before long you and Harriet will be together again, I say.

Harry looks at me blankly.

—In your next incarnations, I say.

—Ah, says Harry. Yes. But for the moment I'm alone.

—I'm sure you'll manage, I say.

—Oh, I'll be fine, says Harry. In fact I look forward to the time when I'm alone.

Harriet always goes first.

—Goes first?

—Drowns, says Harry. She can't swim, you see. Harriet always drowns.

—Always? I ask faintly.

—Always, says Harry.

We continue to stare into the paddling-pond.

Dr Kumar concluded there was no need for an inquest. And Harry did not stay long after the funeral.

Harriet is buried under a jacaranda in the old colonial cemetery. The inscription on the headstone reads:

HARRIET

WIFE OF HARRY

ALWAYS