



JACOB ARKWRIGHT

*let me tell you about Jacob Arkwright
they said he was a terrible man
but though he was really big and ugly
that giant was really gentle as a lamb
nobody's heart ever bled for him
but that was really a shame
coz he was shot down all three hundred pounds
defending his family name*



Arthur, or a damn fine if decaying replica, looked up at me sweetly as I went over, retrieved his meagre belongings from the pavement and shoved them in a battered shoulder bag.

‘Love or death, man. Love or death.’

I stared vacantly at him, thinking this is not how you greet an old friend, or even enemy come to that.

‘The answer to your question?’ he said, as if continuing a conversation from five minutes ago rather than half a lifetime.

I was still baffled but determined not to be put out. ‘Anyway, it’s good to see you mate. I think.’

‘You too, Steve.’

‘Actually, it’s...’

‘I know,’ he grinned apologetically. ‘An old life, eh?’

‘Something like that.’ But at least I didn’t have to fake death to escape it, I nearly quipped.

‘Sorry Al.’

‘Only one person calls me that - and it’s not you!’ I retorted.

He looked at me with watery eyes, genuinely hurt. ‘Hey man,’ he laughed. ‘No need to flip.’ He thrust out a hand but I held back. What might follow? In the intervening years the Continental embrace had become almost de rigueur but I had no idea if, like me, he was suspicious of it. Though strangely, and against all my best of British instincts, I felt a girlish welling up in the throat as my arm wrapped itself around his bony shoulders. Well, I found myself thinking guiltily, this guy, whoever he is, sure ain’t no apparition.

After a few seconds we pushed away and checked each other out like a couple of stray dogs, disbelieving and shaking our heads ruefully. Sure, it was a clichéd scene, but I guess reality can often be that way - sick making.

Then, as if needing a shot of the mundane, he opened his cap and delved in quickly for loose change, replacing the battered relic carelessly on his head. The once flowing golden locks were gone leaving just a few grey strands held in a wispy pony tail. His face too was thin and ghost-like and, behind the cherubic grin, revealed one or two missing teeth. But he wasn’t as weather-beaten as one might expect a true vagrant might be; indeed, with a bath and shave, he could have scrubbed up well enough to pass for any aged rambler or National Trust visitor. In fact, though the apparel was decidedly threadbare, I was sure I caught a whiff of eau de Cologne - or, implausibly, deodorant. But why not? Despite having now apparently returned to his old ways, he must have experienced the finer things in life once, if only for a while. Perhaps he’d just got into the habit of keeping clean and tidy, or relatively so anyway, and managed to cling on to a few vestiges of decency. But I don’t know; there was something else that didn’t add up.

- Apart from apparently dodging the grim reaper, which funnily enough didn't surprise me too much now I'd gotten over the shock, why was he being so bloody nice?
- Had all the old animosity against me faded, eroded by years of rock-n-roll debauchery, or simply slipped out of mind like so many other senior moments?
- But what about Geronimo?
- He remembered that didn't he?

'You seem worried,' said Arthur. 'Thought I might lay one on ya?'

'No, of course not. It's just...' Although I'd never known him be violent, not when sober anyway, there was always an edge there. An unpredictability, expressed as no more than the odd malevolent glare or cynical remark but which, you sometimes felt, could turn nastier if needs be. So yes, it had occurred that he might be here to wreak belated vengeance; pay back a debt as it were, before it was too late.

There was also another thing bothering me, a less tangible but more disquieting thought than a nasty public scene or even blood on the pavement. It wasn't anything rational, just an uneasy suspicion that this man's presence always heralded disaster - or at the very least, uncomfortable changes in my life. And this I could do without right now, what with me on the verge of a well deserved retirement after years slaving at the chalk face. Maybe a peace offering was in order.

'I just wondered... fancy a coffee?'

'Yeah, why not?' he brightened. 'Tell you what, there's a hip little place nearby - Astral Cakes - know it?'

'Don't you mean...err? What's it called? And, how do you... you know?'

'Questions, questions. Don't be hasty - all will be revealed. Come on man.'

Without further ado, Arthur hobbled off up the precinct, away from the big gleaming stores, towards a narrow side street. 'By the way, did you know that album by Van Morrison was voted the second best of all time by Mojo magazine?'

'What?'

'Astral Weeks of course - it's just about the most rated slice of vinyl ever, by artists anyway - and I don't just mean musos. Loads of painters, writers, film makers and all that have dug it.'

'And you lent him a hand too eh?' I suggested sarcastically.

'Nah! Miserable sod. I just told him not to be so uptight,' he laughed, 'I mean... all that transcendental stuff? It's OK for trippers but...'

He stopped in front of a hand-painted shop front and nodded as if to say 'Voila!' And there, low and behold, was a somewhat jumbled display of healing crystals, incense burners, beeswax candles, fat gold Buddhas, grinning Hindu gods and goddesses, cheeky little dragons and evil looking dwarves, Tibetan prayer wheels, aromatherapy oils, and assorted books and posters on Feng Shui, Tarot reading and numerous alternative therapies; all a far cry from the chic mannequins of John Lewis and Debenhams just a few yards around the corner.

We went in and were immediately suffused in a warm haze of sandalwood and incense that had either a soporific or nauseous effect depending on your disposition. I inclined to the later but for old time's sake and, since this seemed to be Arthur's treat, followed meekly. However, he led me not into the main shop or upstairs to the oriental rugs, gifts and art gallery, but beyond a range of hooker pipes and other smoking paraphernalia down a wooden staircase to a cosy tea room. In some contrast to the rest of the premises, Stottie Kate's was not a hippie tip but a haven of neat old fashioned charm with check tablecloths, lino floor and whitewashed walls, decorated with watercolours of windswept

Northumbrian scenes. On the counter stood a shiny tea urn alongside a display of decidedly scrumptious looking home baked cakes including my favourite, bread pudding; rather crinkled and burnt at the edges but moist and fruity inside (like my companion) and liberally sprinkled with icing sugar.

‘Do you know,’ I beamed at our hostess, a dumpy old girl in flowered dress and white apron, ‘I never knew this place existed. It’s quite... err, different.’

‘You a Southerner then? Like him?’ she said, smiling at my companion with a wary familiarity.

‘Well, I lived in London for a while,’ I admitted.

‘Bit of a rambler too, eh? Same as the old feller?’

I laughed at the absurdity of this suggestion. I may have had a few crazy dreams in my youth, sometimes identifying with Tom Paxton’s ‘Rambling Boy’ - even gone hitch-hiking round Europe with Kerouac’s beat bible in a back pocket ⁽¹⁾, but never were my exploits comparable with Grimsby’s. Indeed, for many years now I’d considered myself a happily staid and settled member of the community - a family man devoted to regular hours, home and garden - boringly predictable even, and proud of it. Sure, it’s true I’d recently given up reading the Daily Mail in favour of the Independent and discovered Jools Holland’s eclectic late night music show (if I could stay awake long enough), but these occasional strolls on the wild side were taken from the safety of a comfy sofa, elderly cat at my slipped feet and curtains to the big bad world firmly drawn. At least, that is the image of suburban normality I chose to present and maybe the safety rug I was clinging on to, though now getting a little concerned Arthur’s mission might be to pull that prop from under me.

‘So?’ he enquired. ‘Which was it?’

‘You what?’ I had my mouth stuffed with Kate’s delicious sweetmeat, a full teapot held up ready for pouring whilst glancing simultaneously at the romantically contrived ruins of Dunstanbrough Castle on the wall above us (who says men can’t multi-task?).

‘You know? Love or death, man? Love or death?’

‘Sorry man... I mean Arthur,’ I was fighting the temptation to revert to an irritating teenage habit of using supposedly hip terminology - a habit my companion had apparently never forsaken, unless he was deliberately winding me up. ‘I have no idea what you’re on about.’

‘Okay, I’ll spell it out. You know the old urban myth that men think about sex every seven minutes? Or is it seven seconds? ⁽²⁾ Whichever! It makes no sense. I mean, what guy’s ever gonna tell the truth to some dude waving a clipboard? And who’d pay for such useless info anyway? But let’s not go there.’

‘No,’ I said pointedly. I’d forgotten how my old friend had the disarming habit of wandering off without notice, not just physically but mentally too. Sometimes it seemed as if his whole life had been a diversion - and he was getting worse. Maybe the poor old sod was simply lost?

‘Well, it isn’t an urban myth - if applied to your kind. I don’t mean about sex, though... who knows? There are some seriously sexy young ladies around these parts - and the colder it gets the more they seem to strip off. You must have noticed?’

‘Your point?’

‘Oh yeah. You can’t fool me. Any real singer-songwriter has a serious habit, like nail biting, they can’t stop or control.’

‘That’s crap!’ I exclaimed.

‘All right then, when you were ambling along earlier - and don’t imagine I didn’t catch you spaced out down there - what was on your mind, eh? Shopping? Household chores for wifey? Sexy chicks? Or some song? Am I right or am I right man?’

‘Well... could be. But the chicks were a close second.’

‘There you are. And since love and death are the most important riffs in music - well in everything really - you must have been strung out on one or the other.’

‘Maybe I was just wondering what stupid nutter was yelling ‘Geronimo!’ down Northumberland Street scaring the shoppers. Someone might have thumped you. Geordies aren’t known for their placid nature you know - especially the women.’

‘Sure it wasn’t just you that was worried?’

‘You’re joking,’ I lied.

‘Anyway – the song?’

‘Umm... that’s assuming I’m still writing songs. I may have given up all that time-wasting nonsense and been thinking about Year Nine’s SATS results for all you know. Now there is a conundrum.’

He spluttering into his tea. ‘You whaaaat?’

‘All right then Sherlock. But it wasn’t a case of either-or.’

‘Both together eh?’ he mused. ‘Well, that’s life I guess. And did you come up with anything deep and meaningful? Not that most people want to scratch the surface these days. They’ve all been hypnotized - Dizneyized, McDonaldized, Facebookized and X-Factorized. Sold out to Babylon man. Anything to avoid reality.’

‘You should know,’ I smiled.

‘Yeah well...’ He looked wistful and then brightened, ‘So what was it?’

‘Okay. Jacob Arkwright – you remember? Song about a guy who kills his own son. I wrote it years ago - can’t remember where or when - late Sixties maybe. It was never exactly a big hit with audiences, but for some perverse reason I sang it anyway - still would if I got half a chance.’

‘And when’s that?’ he demanded.

‘Eh?’

‘Where’d you play these days? Festivals? Clubs? Bars?’ He raised his eyebrows, ‘Kiddies parties?’

I ignored this last dig, despite there being some truth in it and said, ‘Nowhere much. Friends – family maybe. The cat’s my biggest fan - on second thoughts, maybe not.’

Arthur shook his head ruefully. I knew where this was heading but I was damned if I was about to let him put me down. I’d worked hard and done a lot I was proud of over the past thirty odd years. Whether it meant much to anyone else or not I neither knew nor cared, it meant something to me. This man’s opinion was irrelevant.

‘You know I used to run a band touring schools, theatres and the like?’ I glared at him, trying to assert some kind of artistic authority. ‘It was a pro gig you know?’

‘Oh, so I was right? Kids stuff. What happened to that then?’

‘Well - you know how it is? Things change.’

‘And that was it? You just gave up? Threw in the towel?’

‘Gotta live,’ I reminded him. ‘And for most of us that means work. Proper work. You know, getting your hands dirty - clocking in and all that?’

He continued shaking his head and then, in a most condescending tone, said, ‘Yeah man, sure.’

‘Look,’ I yelled, shoving the chair back with a dramatic bang and standing up. ‘Whilst I’ve been busting my guts trying to support a family, getting up early rain or shine, paying endless bills and God knows what else, never mind teaching hundreds of bloody awkward kids for years, you’ve been well... strumming your pathetic life away in shop doorways. Even Big Issue sellers have some social conscience - where’s yours? You’re just a fucking mess - man!’

I could have said a lot more but simply glowered down angrily for a few seconds and thundered, ‘Eh?’ Then strode off up the stairs and out onto the street. As soon as the sobering

North East wind hit my face I began having second thoughts. Part of me wanted to go back and rub it in, like an aggrieved lover longing to wallow in righteous anger, the other half felt stupid. In one sense Arthur had been totally right and maybe, just maybe, I was really more upset with myself than him at the sudden realisation. Perhaps, too, I'd neglected or avoided some serious issues, though what these were I couldn't quite see. We all have to grow up some day – don't we? Well, don't we?

But in another way he couldn't have been more wrong. I may have stopped performing in pubs and clubs years back but had probably increased creative output in many other more orthodox areas in education and the media, etc. Not only had I written hundreds of songs, as well as numerous musicals, plays, novels, short stories, poems and so on, but also directed stage productions, collaborated with other musicians and recorded loads of material on albums, some of which had even found their way to BBC broadcasts. I had not, in other words, been idle. Okay, in some people's eyes, all this didn't really count because it hadn't been aimed at adults, but I knew better. It had required the same amount of effort and enterprise, with the added restraints imposed by the system and, of course, the constant hassles of school discipline and management problems – and that was just the staff.

- But in any case who the hell was he, or anyone else for that matter, to confront me?
- It was my life and I had done nothing to be ashamed of, nothing that he knew of anyway. Had I?
- Then again - what did this ghost want of me?
- Was I missing something?

As I hit the street, angry but confused, I told myself not to take the daft old coot so seriously. Like many elderly folk he could be tactless and insensitive, though probably meant no harm. At the same time, I wasn't going back to apologise. He'd interrupted what I'd planned as a quiet day off and, having perfectly legitimate reasons for not returning to work, didn't want any more of it messed up. And there was still my medical condition to worry about.

FOOTNOTES - Chapter 3

(1) *On The Road* by Jack Kerouac, was written in April 1951 and published by Viking Press in 1957. It is a largely autobiographical work based on road trips of Kerouac and his friends across mid-century America. Often considered a defining work of the post war Beat Generation - inspired by jazz, poetry, and drug experiences – it continues to influence numerous artists. Though many of the names and details were changed for the novel, hundreds of references in the book have a real source. When the book was originally published *The New York Times* hailed it as 'the most beautifully executed, the clearest and most important utterance' of Kerouac's generation. The novel was chosen by *Time* magazine as one of the 100 best English language novels from 1923 to 2005.

(2) According to the Kinsey Institute (*Kinsey Report – Sexual Behaviour In The Human Male*, published in 1948) 54% of men think about sex every day or several times a day, 43% think about sex a few times every month or a few times every week, and 4% less than once a month. If true, that men think about sex every seven seconds, it would total about 8000 times a day and is highly unlikely.

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