

Jack Dowling

Richard

I glanced out of my bank of studio windows to watch the snow, which had started falling as a light dusting in early afternoon but was now drifting down in thick white flower-shaped flakes as evening set in.

I decided that a bar in the Village would be the perfect place to sit at a window, beer in hand, and watch the storm. I trusted that my aged pickup truck, a California native, would not balk at the cold and refuse to start. After a number of grinding turn-overs, the engine gave in and started; gratefully, I drove south to Greenwich Village.

As I waited at a stoplight at the intersection of three Village streets, which left a tiny triangle of sidewalk, windy and snow-covered. I looked out my driver's side window, just slightly dusted with snow, and saw a slender figure standing in that isolated spot being whipped by the wind. He appeared young, beautiful, boyish, his head of black curls glistening with snow melt. A bewildered stance was clear as he looked at the traffic passing on all sides of his cold perch. There was luggage at his feet, good leather luggage with straps.

I rolled down the window and called out to him, "Why are you standing out there in this snowstorm?"

"I have to go to Brooklyn Heights. I don't know how to get there. I seem to be lost. I don't know New York. I just arrived."

"The Eighth Avenue subway is just across the street," I called out. He moved closer to hear me better as I pointed over to a Sixth Avenue entrance. "It goes to Brooklyn. Oh, no ... no, wait a minute. I think that the IRT up at Sheridan Square goes to Brooklyn Heights. Clark Street, I think."

We looked at each other, both waiting for the next exchange, his intense stare oddly more than casual. I felt momentarily frozen in his warm gaze. I snapped out of it, and without thought, I said, “Put your bags in the back of the truck, and I’ll drive you up to that subway station. You must be freezing.” He quickly tossed his snow-covered bags in the bed of the truck and slid in beside me on the passenger side.

“Why are you going to Brooklyn Heights?”

“I have a place to stay overnight. I flew in from California today and fly to London early in the morning. They’ll drive me there. They’re friends of a friend.”

“Why are you flying to England? Do you go to college there? I’m sorry I don’t mean to pry. I’m just curious.”

“I promised to meet someone in London,” was all he said with a smile, his blue eyes wide and clear.

I was captivated by him. Not just his stunning looks, but his manner. Well-spoken and deferential. His smile showed dimpled cheeks and perfect teeth. As we approached Sheridan Square and the Seventh Avenue subway, I was so smitten by his warm friendly manner that I didn’t want to let him go. He was charming but seemed fragile in his delicate movements.

“I’ll drive you to Brooklyn,” I said impulsively, looking over at him. I had never driven to Brooklyn and had no idea how to find the street where he had his bed for the night. One of those oddly named streets common in the Heights.

I was not attracted to the very young, neither then or now, but I found him intriguing. How old was he? He could be 17 or 23. I had no way of knowing, having seen or met young men like him whose age was a mystery.

“Oh, thank you, how kind of you,” he replied and sat back in the seat pulling his knees back to dry his shoes in the heater, his tenseness apparent from a tightly held body. “My name is Richard,” he finally said, staring at me at length.

“I’m Michael,” I replied, looking over at him, fitted so neatly into the cab of my truck now with his one leg folded under the other as he switched feet for the heat.

How we arrived not only at the right street in Brooklyn Heights, Pierrepoint, but at the correct house number in the row of well-preserved brownstones I have no idea. On the Brooklyn Bridge, I took the first exit I saw, and we were in the Heights.

“I guess there was some angelic magic in finding this address.” I smiled as I brought the truck to a stop. I expected a simple thank-you from him. Instead, he looked at me, his sapphire blue eyes bright in the dome light of the truck’s cab and said, “Can I come home with you?”

I was stunned. For a moment I couldn’t speak. My heart began to beat hard, flooding me with a full body blood rush. I stared at his open questioning face and said, “Yes.”

He slipped out of the truck and grabbed his luggage from the back.

What will I do with him I wondered? I wasn’t at all sexually attracted to him, but he was so incredibly lovely, like a Caravaggio painting, that my impulse was to soothe him, offer him a night’s rest from the stress of traveling, the unexpected snow. I foresaw us in bed; I might kiss him lightly, just a kiss on the cheek. I felt so drawn to and protective of him; did I believe that I was saving a work of art from the storm? Where had my emotional response come from? It was not part of my nature, suddenly caring deeply for a stranger without the thought of sex or concern for threat. I wondered about his explaining his change of plan. What will he tell his friends?

Richard trotted up to the doorway with his luggage, which was taken in, had a brief exchange of words with the person at the door, then came leaping back through the snow like a white-tailed deer and jumped in the truck with a wide grin.

I quickly found the off exit from the bridge and drove home. It was late when I parked. We climbed the stairs of my building and entered the loft where I guided my waif down the hall to the bedroom.

Standing side by side, we quickly undressed ignoring the cold. He slipped his slim body into my bed wearing nothing, his smooth ivory colored skin disappearing under the layered bedclothes. I had planned to put on a pair of pajamas, but on seeing his innocent nakedness—not looking at me, he had undressed without any self-consciousness or suggestive manner—I slipped in beside him naked, too.

I didn't know what he expected of me. Was I to be his final American sex romp? His last fuck? I knew immediately by his, "Can I come home with you?" that he was gay. But how did he intuit that I was too? I could have been a predator in a pickup truck looking for any wayward youth. In our brief time riding in the truck, there had been no flirtation, no innuendo of anything sexual; we chatted about nothing, Richard gazing from the truck window watching the heavy snow fall, me keeping the pickup from skidding on the hard-to-see iced-over roadway.

As I lay awake wondering if he was waiting for some move on my part, he rolled closer to me, put his head on my shoulder, laid his hand lightly on my chest and fell asleep. I gazed at him, his finely defined black eyebrows, the delicate shape of his nose. After a moment, I carefully put my arm around his light, slim body and gently pulled him toward me.

I lay awake for what seemed hours holding this young man, his warm body now giving off its own personal scent, wondering just why I agreed to his asking to sleep with me.

And me. Why me? What was it that he saw in me? The only thought that went through my mind was ... "he's My Boy." I was 40 and, by choice, lived alone.

I awoke early morning alone. There was a note. *“Thank you, I like your paintings, Richard.”* That was all. Not even his surname.

In the months that followed I thought of him, wondering still why he had chosen me, why he was traveling alone to London to “meet someone.” Could that someone be a lover? A patron? I was becoming consumed by his image, his frailty. I still felt protective of him despite the brief few hours we spent together. He was still “My Boy” in my obsessive mind, and I couldn’t shake him away even when briefly taking up with others.

About six months later, in May I think, I received a postcard from London with the message, *“I hope that you are well. I’m returning soon. Richard.”* That was all. He must have noted my name and address on leaving my loft. How did he get back to Brooklyn Heights for his luggage and the lift to the airport at dawn on that snowy winter morning? I had always wondered. And what does I’m coming back actually mean? Coming back? Coming back to see me? Then no further word, and I stopped wondering about his plans.

I live alone, always have. My work is my passion, and there is not much room for sharing. I have good friends and on occasion a boyfriend or two, but my commitment to my work is absolute.

There had been occasions when a much younger gay man became attached to me in a nonsexual way, and I soon realized that for some, I had become somewhat of a father figure. If they were looking for guidance, I tried to help, but I never let it become intimate. Eventually the relationship would change. They would find their path, and we often became good friends.

Midsummer, late in June I guess, I walked down to the Village to a small coffee and breakfast place that had a gay following and good food. I was meeting

my longtime friend Peter, who was seated at a table when I entered. As I headed toward him, I froze. There was Richard moving from table to table, tray or platter in hand. He was the waiter in this small but pleasant room. He practically danced light-footed between tables as I stared at him. Peter waved to me breaking my sense of stunned awe, and I joined him, all the time my eyes on Richard, the sweet bedmate of winter, months back.

Richard approached our table. When he reached us, Peter said, “Hi, Richard, this is my friend Michael. What’s special today?”

Richard looked directly at me without any sense of recognition and said, “Hello, Michael,” and then to Peter, “We have blueberry pancakes today. I know you like those.”

“I’ll have them then,” Peter said and turned to me and suggested that I have the same, that they were, as he put it, “Pure heaven.”

Still staring at our server, my Richard of a winter’s night with no recognition from him, I said, “I’ll have the same, Richard.”

“Thank you ... coffee?” which brought a yes from us both, and off Richard skipped, again winding his way lightly among the tables of chatting gay men.

Calming myself down, I said to Peter, “How do you know Richard? Do you eat here all the time?”

“I met him on Christopher Street some weeks ago. He was on his way here. We chatted briefly, and he came by my place after work.”

“Did you sleep together? He’s really young. I didn’t think young was your type.” I fished, desperate for information.

“No, we didn’t. I offered him a glass of wine, but he said that he didn’t drink, so I had one and gave him a Coke. We just talked. He said he didn’t know anyone in New York.”

That comment sent a stab through my heart. He did know someone in New York. Someone he had asked to sleep with—me!

Peter continued, “I don’t know why I invited him. You’re right, he’s not my type, but there he was walking toward me on Christopher among a flock of good-looking young men, he more beautiful than any of them. He had a lonely lost air about him, so on impulse I said hello, he stopped, smiled, and we talked. He had just returned from England.”

“Does he still stop by to see you?”

“Well, actually, Michael, he’s living with me now,” Peter said, his face going slightly rosy. “His rented room was tiny but pricey, and he doesn’t make a lot of money here.”

Speechless for the moment, I took a deep breath then asked, “So are you sleeping together? Is he your lover? Are you having sex?” I knew that Peter had only one bed in his studio apartment, a pullout sofa.

“Well, sort of, perhaps, but I don’t think that we’re in any way lovers. I mean, after all, there he is in my apartment, the most beautiful boy in New York, don’t you think? How could I resist touching him? Look at him.”

I was seething, ready to kill. Richard was “My Boy,” not a loose young man sleeping with the first man who asked, then moving in likely the next day. I couldn’t think straight. If Peter had not been such a good longtime friend, I would have stormed out in a jealous rage.

Richard was approaching our table with our pancakes. He had already, with a swift move, set our coffee on the table. I was so engrossed with Peter’s recounting I hadn’t noticed.

He put Peter’s plate down first and then reached across the table to serve me. Our eyes met, and I said, “Do you remember me, Richard?” and without a blink of an eye, he said, “Yes,” and turned away to take care of other customers.

“You know him?” Peter asked, startled.

“Some months ago. Before Christmas. It was snowing,” I replied and looking down, I started in on my pancakes leaving Peter to stare. I was shaking in my seat and nearly spilled my coffee.

“But he told me that he was in London until recently,” Peter whispered.

“He was,” was all I said, eager to finish, and get out of there I felt so hurt and confused.

In the following months, two months, six months, it is all so clouded in my mind, I would run into Richard here and there in the Village. We would have a brief hello, he smiling widely as if he were waiting to see me at that very moment, then he would be off with no further exchange.

One weekend Peter invited me to his summer house in Connecticut. We had not seen much of one another since that breakfast where I first saw Richard. I was unable to get over my anger, and perhaps Peter was embarrassed about how the breakfast had played out. I arrived by cab from the station and on entering Peter’s cottage, there was Richard busily propping up pillows and emptying ashtrays. What a good little housewife, I thought to myself nastily as he moved away toward the kitchen without a word to me. Later Peter told me that he and Richard did not live together any longer, that it had only been for a few weeks. Richard had found a better job in a Village bookstore and was able to rent his own apartment.

“Where did he find an apartment?” I asked.

“Well, funny, it seems, but I don’t really know. He hasn’t told me. I only have his phone number.”

I won’t describe the uncalled-for scenarios that ran through my head at that. He was being kept ... he was married ... that was unlikely...he was a hustler, I

concluded, which erased my longing to understand him. I became somewhat dismissive of him as the day wore on.

At bedtime Peter indicated my room and said that I would be sharing it with Richard. There were only two bedrooms, Peter's and another for guests. I expected twin beds, but a double bed was it.

There were clean linens stacked on the bed, and Richard began to make the bed up while I went to brush my teeth in the washroom down the hall. When I got back, Richard had stripped down, still the slight wisp of a boy in appearance that I so clearly remembered, and was climbing up into the high wide bed. Nervously I did the same. Is this it, I wondered, after all this time? Am I expected to make love to him? But no, it was exactly as it had been that cold snowy night of last winter. Richard lay on his side, then rolled over, put his head on my shoulder and lightly took hold of my upper arm.

After lying awake for agonizing hours, I slid out of bed, grabbed a comforter and left the bedroom for the living room sofa. In the morning, when Peter asked why, I said that I snored badly and did not want to disturb Richard.

"I didn't hear you," Peter said, "and I'm a light sleeper," as he went to make coffee. When Richard joined us, he made no mention of my move.

Feeling foolish, confused, I made an excuse to leave for New York after breakfast. After a few protests, Peter called a local cab to take me to the train. He and Richard stood in the doorway of the house, waving as I left.

On the train I was furious with myself. Why didn't I say something as we lay in bed? I didn't the first time around either. What was it about him that kept me so tongue-tied?

I continued to run into Richard, and our exchange was as before, he staring at me with a lovely smile, a nod, and then slipping away without a word. He

seemed to always be at the same place I would be: the bars, a coffee shop, once at the library. I asked Peter if Richard asked him where I might be and when. Peter, slightly annoyed perhaps since Richard had moved out, said, “How am I to know where you are and where you go? You don’t tell me!”

Well, I thought, that was an odd reply. Why should I tell anyone where I am or what I am doing unless I’m meeting someone? Richard’s appearance so often in a place that I had decided to go to baffled me. How did he know?

My work had been going well. Over the years, I had been included in a number of select group shows. That led to an invitation to show my work in a one-person exhibit by a respected gallery, the culmination of years of hard work. The gallery printed up an oversize postcard with a photograph of me in my studio on one side, and on the other, a brief bio and room to address the card. I carried a number of them with me to hand out to people I knew but had no address for. Richard was one of those, and so on running into him, I gave him a card and invited him to the opening, the first actual exchange we ever had had.

At the opening I saw him arrive, alone as usual. It became crowded, and later in looking around, I realized that he had slipped away. The pattern continues, I told myself.

As time passed Richard somewhat faded from my mind. My obsession over him had cooled, although when he did come to mind my response was unsettling. He was still “My Boy” somewhere in my psyche.

Then one evening, it came crashing to an end. I was having dinner, and Peter called. He was crying and shattered me with his news. I dropped into a nearby chair, holding tight to the black phone.

Richard had taken some pills. He had committed suicide.

Peter finally had his address, he said, and when he could not reach Richard after waiting over an hour for a lunch date, he went to the apartment. The door was unlocked. Peter entered and found Richard sitting in his street-found wing chair, looking as handsome as usual, composed but dead. Peter had called 911, waited, explained that he was a friend and left. Richard's remains were shipped to California by a relation.

A week or so later, Peter and I finally met for a drink, our first communion since Richard's death. Peter said, "I want to tell you something."

"Yes?"

"On a side table, there was a book he must have been reading. His page marker? The announcement for your one-man show years back."

It took me a long time to get over Richard's decision, to get over hurt and bafflement about the relationship that never was. A relationship that was fleeting, yet he had kept the announcement of my exhibit with my photo.

I threw myself into my work and tried to let my thinking of him simply go.

Six months after Richard's death, I received a letter from a London solicitor, Geoffrey Greene.

When Richard's mother learned that she was terminally ill, she appointed him as Richard's guardian; Richard was 12 years old at the time. She arranged for a boarding school in California, where she had distant family. When Richard came of age, 21, Greene asked that he come to London to take care of paperwork. Richard told Greene of meeting someone when he was overnight in New York. That it was an uncanny experience for him. Suddenly out of this veil of swirling white snow, there he was, Richard said. We were only briefly together. No sex, I didn't want to spoil it, but he's the one, he's the one. I knew the moment I saw him that one day we would be together.

Greene wrote, “I asked if he would go to this someone when he returned, who I assume was you. I have to paraphrase his reply, but it was more or less this.

‘I’ll find out where he spends time. I’ll play hard to get, a teaser, until finally I break him down. The gay world in the States is just a series of one-night stands. I’ll simply be there wherever he is. I’ll not say a word. I’ll become that mystery person in his life who silently loves him. It will take time. I’ll wear him down until he is so used to seeing me that he’ll want me with him all of the time. That’s my plan. I decided that on the flight to London.’ ”

Reading that astonished me and nearly broke my heart. Why didn’t he just openly cruise me? I would have been kind. I was not attracted to him sexually, but still he fascinated me. He was more of a wood’s creature, behaving the way a fast-footed denizen of the woods would. I wouldn’t be his lover, but I would have looked out for him, taken care of him even.

Greene’s letter continued.

“I just had to know if Richard was happy, you see? I wondered if perhaps it worked out for him. His plan to enrapture you, so to speak? I would be grateful if you might write me back.”

I let a few days pass before composing a reply. It was hard. I didn’t want to think about Richard anymore, yet I couldn’t stop.

“Dear Geoffrey,

Thank you for your letter. Richard was the ongoing fleeting mystery of my life. Twice, over time, we happened only by chance to sleep in the same bed, but there was nothing more to it than the closeness of two warm bodies. He was a constant distant presence in my life that I never came to understand.”

And with that our correspondence ended.

Richard, Richard. Did I love you? Perhaps. I think of you often. I see your smile, your black curls surrounding an angelic face, a boy who never aged. I have.