

## *Friends*

Once, two boys in short pants and unkempt hair, we had vowed eternal friendship. We were thirteen years old when we met and possessed just sufficient naivety to make adult recollection embarrassing. Spontaneously, neither needing to ask nor be asked, we gave, received, shared and took pleasure in the sharing. Together, we walked to school talking about our night-time dreams or raced through the rain, laughing all the while as though to lure the sunshine out from hiding to join us in our play. In the park, we climbed the highest maples, fished for tadpoles in muddy creeks, wrestled like cubs upon the lawns, and then, tired of these, gave ourselves up to talk, to talk of big and intangible things, like life, duty, service, purpose. Andre, his eyes glinting behind his heavy dark-rimmed glasses and his brow a field of furrows spoke about the books he had read and talked of the world as a huge place in which there were numerous countries and men of all colours who dressed and behaved in fascinating ways. And he talked of the poor in Africa and Asia and of a man called Albert Schweitzer and of how noble a deed it is to relieve men of their sickness and pain. And, moved by example, we decided to become doctors when we grew up, like Albert Schweitzer, and dedicate ourselves to the performance of good deeds and the relief of suffering, and to do this, side by side, for the rest of our lives.

But while we were in the fourth form, Andre's family decided to return to Paris from whence they had come several years before. On the dock, we promised to write and one day to meet again. The ship was long out of sight before I turned for home.

Short pants gave way to trousers, unkempt hair became subdued, games yielded to earnest study. In high-school, I found myself in turmoil, not knowing what I wanted, oscillating like a metronome between extremes. Belief and scepticism, acceptance and rejection, the desire for commitment and the need for withdrawal — these nagged at me without respite, turning my adolescence into one lasting image of confusion. I matriculated comfortably enough, but

my future turned itself over a thousand times. I wanted to do what was useful, but medicine, law, engineering — the obvious courses — held no appeal. Without really knowing why, and allowing myself to drift, I entered university, choosing politics and history in some vague expectation that one day I could use that knowledge to write or enter politics or develop a new concept or philosophy that might make some crucial impact.

I spent four years at the university and grew in militancy with every year. More and more, I joined in student demonstrations, wrote for student papers, lectured on capital punishment, Biafra, Vietnam, and advocated a radical stand to do away with government, privilege and reaction and with the corruption that I saw as rampant in high places. I was listened to and in a way I felt important, a student leader with something to say. I emerged from the university with a Bachelor of Arts Honours and, once in the marketplace, with the realisation that I had taken myself too seriously. I found work as proof-reader with a publisher, then as clerk with a building firm and later joined the staff of a newspaper as reporter of local events. I thought more seriously of writing. But ideas came with difficulty and my efforts foundered as I realised that, at bottom, I had nothing worthwhile to say. The best that I could produce were evanescent frivolous stories for an inferior newspaper and a string of short stories that were returned soon after submission with a string of rejection slips. Reality had outstripped my ambitions, and existence, once so full of promise and good intentions, became reduced to a series of depressions as I woke to the nest of conformity, mediocrity and insignificance in which I, like the rest of society I had hoped to change, had made my bed.

It was then that I decided to travel abroad.

With guide-book and camera, I made my way across Europe. Madrid, Amsterdam, Venice, Rome, Zurich. In awe I stood before the Rembrandts and Tintoretts, was moved by the eloquence of Michelangelo, edified by the mastery of Titian, Ghiberti, Velasquez, Veronese. They were precious hours that I spent in the museums and galleries, seeing at first hand the grandeur to which a man could attain, given a vision and a will to create. To create. The very phrase resounded with numerous possibilities. I felt regenerated and it suddenly seemed simple to return, in spirit if not in reality, to that

earlier innocence before dreams had turned sour and ambitions had been thwarted.

Memory swelled into nostalgia. And in its sway, while flying over the Alps towards Paris, I remembered Andre, and remembered, too, our naive vows, our more earthly promises, our plans. Borne on the cloud of sentimentality in which childhood became a thing so pure, I decided to seek him out.

I found Andre's name in a telephone directory and waited until evening to call him.

We grappled briefly with names and places and dates, and, remembering me, he greeted me with expressions of delight and surprise. He laughed a lot.

"Julian! Julian from Melbourne!", he said in accented English. "It is only yesterday. . ."

"Twelve years of yesterdays", I answered with a laugh.

"So long already? We must celebrate. I will tell Josette: Come tomorrow evening — for dinner."

"Tres charmant", I said, knowing no other French.

"Bien. We will have much to talk about."

The next day, I set about discovering Paris. It was March. The weather was warm, the sky a dull blue, and thin patchy clouds drifted continually across the face of the sun. On that day, I was the typical tourist. I visited the Louvre and Jeu de Paume, strolled along the Tuilleries, browsed among the shops of the Champs Elysees, circled the Arc de Triomphe and climbed the Eiffel Tower, taking photographs wherever I could. By evening, I was tired, but in a blissful way, and looked forward to meeting Andre to talk about, among other things, the art and taste and balanced beauty that I had come to see as Paris.

Andre lived in a two-storied red-brick house set in the centre of a spacious garden which smelled of carnations and moist freshly-mown grass. In the far corner were a swing and a sandpit and a tricycle stood alongside a rocking-horse; beds of azaleas and pansies lay beneath the windows and the paths were tiled with slate. His was a quiet neighbourhood, a district of shaded oak-lined avenues and well-tended gardens. Between the branches, the last strands of daylight were vanishing. I felt the coming of rain.

A child with curly ginger hair opened the door. Behind her, striding down the corridor, came Andre. He had grown tall

and solid, with a shock of hair combed back and a pair of dark-rimmed glasses above his firm nose. He held one hand outstretched to meet mine and the other prepared to brace itself about my shoulders. He had dark rings around his eyes, as though he had not slept for a long time.

"Is it really you?", he asked, laughing.

"The same. You have hardly changed. Taller, sturdier, but Andre behind it all."

"But you I would never have recognised. It's marvellous. Tell me, how long are you staying in Paris?"

"Three days."

"Pshaa, a mere breath. In Paris, a *week* is not enough, nor even a month. . ."

From the kitchen came his wife, a blonde, attractive, relaxed woman. She was about twenty-five, had a smoothly-rounded chin and a nose that was best described as Grecian. Brief introductions followed. The little girl who had opened the door disappeared and returned promptly with a doll for me to look at, one which closed its eyes and purred when laid down.

"Tres belle", I said in a French that broke my teeth. "What do you call her?"

Andre translated.

"Soussy", lisped the child.

"Very pretty", I said.

"The doll's name is Françoise," explained Andre's wife who herself was called Josette. "Michelle calls her Soussy for short."

"A charming child", I said.

"Since you telephoned," Josette said, her accent nasal but not unpleasant, "Andre has spoken of nothing else but you. His best friend at school, his nearest rival in class. You were going to study medicine together, help the sick, the poor, become famous. All those things."

I laughed. "Andre, you still remember?"

"Of course. Can a man forget the sweetest wine he has ever tasted?" He sounded as though he were quoting. "Ah, childhood. The wrestling on the grass, the beatings, the little jealousies, those petty rivalries over — what was her name? — Mary?, Margaret?, in the second form." He took me by an arm and led me to the dining-room. "And our promises. We were going to turn the world over." His eyes flickered

behind his glasses. "We were such children, no? You see, I remember."

Josette excused herself with a laugh that tinkled and returned to the kitchen. "Michelle", she said, "come and help Maman."

Andre poured two brandies, offered me one, sat down and described a generous arc about the room with his free hand.

"How do you like my little palace?", he asked as though it were the most appropriate thing to say.

I had already looked about me. A quiet placidity rested in that place, and good temper, order, concern. Wallpaper of subdued colour and conservative pattern covered the walls. In several places hung reproductions of artists who mixed colours with pleasing effects if no great depth. Two chandeliers scattered the light diffusely and a thick white carpet told of easy affluence.

"Have you lived here long?", I asked him. "In this house?"

"Three years." He was twenty-eight but there were grey streaks in his hair. He studied his fingertips as he had so often done in moments of earnestness and began to talk. "We lived near Place d'Italie, close to the hospital where I worked, for two years after we were married. A nice area, but too noisy and cramped. I worked, made some money. Josette gave private piano lessons. Her parents — her father is an obstetrician — helped us a little. Then we moved. Here, out of town, we have the sun all day — no smog, dust, factory smells. In Spring, this is Eden itself. And for the child, what is healthier than fresh air all year round, and sunshine? — But tell me about yourself."

Josette returned, carrying a tray. Michelle followed with a bowl of salad.

"One lives and works", I said, "and prays that the bread will come in."

Andre smiled. "For one who can come to Europe from Australia, the bread cannot be too difficult in coming. But tell us, how do you like this city? Beautiful, no?"

Without waiting for an answer, he turned to Michelle who stood by his arm and teased her with his brandy. "Ici, ma cherie. Un peu?"

"Andre", said Josette.

Michelle, alive and keen, tasted the drink and grimaced. Her cheeks flushed and her eyes filled with tears. They

glistened and danced. Pearls. Childless, I felt deprived of something precious. We laughed.

"Let us begin to eat", said Josette, serving the first course.

Dinner passed pleasantly, a more than welcome respite from the cheap stuffy restaurants and coffee-houses in which I had eaten since beginning my journey. After his initial enthusiasm, Andre spoke relatively little. By way of apology, he said that he had been kept up for most of the previous night by a difficult case. A patient had become quite acutely ill and the diagnosis had remained obscure until the morning. By contrast, Josette played the vivacious hostess. With feminine curiosity, she probed into my personal life. What would I do after my journey? What did my work entail? Which magazines did I work for? Was I, perhaps, engaged? I gave brief and precise replies. Feeling no pride in my work, I was not disposed to elaborate. Nor did I reveal my deeper ambitions, to write, the fruition of which, at that moment, seemed as remote and inaccessible as the past itself. Josette used her hands for emphasis and asked her questions with a charm to which it was impossible to take exception. But in their company I sensed, more than I had anticipated as likely, the hollowness of my existence, its solitude, its barrenness.

We ate and talked. Michelle asked if I liked Soussy and, through Josette, told me about her kindergarten. Andre smiled absently.

"Do you know", Josette said, sweeping a stray blonde wave behind her ear, "that this is one of the few evenings that Andre manages to spend at home? He is forever at the surgery or at the hospital or attending meetings, going to seminars. For this rare occasion, I must be grateful to you."

"There were worse times", Andre said.

"That is true, of course. When he worked only at the hospital."

"I am a man for myself now. No superiors to please, professors, colleagues, others. I work for myself. I work hard, yes, but enjoy it."

"And you make a good living, I see", I said, indicating the wallpaper and the chandeliers.

"Hard work has its just rewards", he said.

"You are satisfied?", I asked.

He seemed puzzled. "You are not?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

During the last course, conversation became more sluggish and I was grateful when, after coffee, Andre suggested that we go driving.

“But you’re tired”, I protested, more out of courtesy than sincerity.

“What of it? A man is flexible in his needs. This is an occasion. Come, I will show you a part of the city — my favourite part.”

I thanked Josette who in turn thanked me for remembering an old friend and wished me success. Her hand was smooth and warm. She smiled with her eyes. “You will write to us, no?”, she asked at the door. I pinched Michelle’s cheeks between my fingers. “Is Soussy sleeping?” I asked. She said something which Josette translated. “She said Soussy is sleeping because she still has to grow.”

“How precious you are”, I said. Sleep was gathering in her own eyes.

It was ten o’clock. We drove to the Ile de la Cite. Few people were about. Like the sun during the day, the moon now hid behind the clouds. Under the glow of the street-lamps, the white stone of the bridges glistened.

“Here one finds peace”, Andre said. “A man can straighten out his thoughts here.”

I looked along the length of the dark brooding waters, at the bridges, the lamps, the long buildings silhouetted against the night. It was cold. I turned up the collar of my coat.

“There is a comforting stillness here,” Andre said. “During the day, one is always hurrying about, anxious to get things done for the many people who depend upon one’s services. In the evenings, solitude and meditation are a blessing. Over there”, he pointed, “is the Notre Dame and there the Conciergerie. You will no doubt visit them while you are in Paris. Opposite us, on the other side, is the Left Bank. And the university, of course, is there as well.” He paused and cracked his fingers. That was one habit of his I had forgotten about. “The students are making the headlines again. When I passed through there, I must have been one of the docile generation. Study and examinations. No time for anything else. But today they talk of upturning society and establishing a new order. But what sort of order, even they do not know. They have one saving grace, these students — they mellow and become as middle-class as the rest of us.”

I recalled my own involvements as a student. "Andre", I said, "have you grown so old before your time?"

He removed his glasses and rubbed the inner corners of his eyes. Another habit that I suddenly remembered again. "In this world", he said slowly, "surely you must know this too — one cannot remain a child forever. There comes a time when a man makes a reckoning with himself, asserts those values that he deems important and rearranges his priorities. There comes a time, too, when one realises one's ineffectuality in the face of the iniquities that pervade society and must make peace with the regret that not the best-intentioned of men can eliminate them. Our students have not yet seen this. In the end, all one can effectively do — and here the choice is solely one's own — is to perform one's small bit in this world in the trust that someone, a neighbour, a friend, a stranger, has lived a little longer, a little more happily, or a little more comfortably. — But, really, I am too serious. Let us walk on."

Splinters of light floated on the surface of the river, sometimes rising above the ripples, sometimes sinking. From far away came the sound of loud talk, of laughter, of running feet. The evening haunted me with memories. The years returned to me in a whirl, wasted years ridden through with aimlessness and the fitful pursuit of sunbeams, tremulous beams which illuminated the future with a false glow. And I recalled the excuses, the postponements of work and action, and the rationalisations fortified into elaborate mental structures to mitigate the pain that came from the lack of tangible achievement.

Free of wind, yet biting, the air set in suspended motion on our shoulders. For want of conversation, Andre shivered and commented on the coldness of the evening. I agreed.

Then, rather suddenly, he added, "Do you remember the evenings we knew back home? They were just like this."

Yet such evenings we had not shared. Warm evenings when we sat by the beach, windy evenings when we raced each other home from the pictures, even cool evenings when we sat indoors bent over a game of chess — these we had known together but not the chilly windless kind which found two friends with nothing to say.

"Yes", I answered.

We walked along the streets and over the bridges, beneath which the Seine wrestled with the clouds. For a moment,



under a street-lamp, we discovered each other's eyes. Then they fled from one another, fugitives before some terrible truth. We had drifted apart — forever. In that glance, I read a question and an accusation.

“Julian”, it asked, “what has become of you, after all the promise that was in you?”

I wanted to answer but I had no answer. Instead, I cried out with a vehemence that cracked the ice of evening.

“And what of you, Andre? What of the vows of friendship, of performing great deeds together, of discovering fame. Remember Albert Schweitzer? Is a house outside Paris all you really want from life and bondage to a routine of work and sleep and mere homely comforts?”

He looked at me. As before, he seemed puzzled and, I thought, hurt.

“I do my bit”, he said softly.

We parted soon after, two strangers, two remote souls standing in one small corner of a vast indifferent universe. He offered to drive me back. I declined, saying I preferred to walk. Much had happened that day and I wanted, I said, to assimilate it at leisure.

“Je comprend”, he said without conviction, and smiled with difficulty as we shook hands. I thought of Josette and Michelle and deep within I wished them well.

Andre's car disappeared around a corner. I remembered a ship vanishing over the horizon long ago. I stayed in my place for several moments more, then with a shrug of the shoulders turned back to the hotel.