

THE INTERVIEW

by

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I keep going over it in my mind but I cannot make any sense of it. Yet I have to make sense of it to maintain my sanity. I can recall it all vividly but my reason rejects my recollection. It was an interesting assignment, to interview an aged lady writer whose reputation was undergoing a renaissance. After years of neglect it had now become *de rigueur* to admire her work in fashionable literary circles. I remember as I emerged from the subway, slowly making my way up the narrow steps, the sunlight glanced across my eyes, stinging them in its bright rays. It had been raining earlier and pools of water lay glistening in the indentations of the crumbling steps. As I reached ground level I looked about me. The street was deserted, a long and slightly impoverished row of terraced houses ran parallel to the road. I crossed the road and walked past their silent unexceptional facades. I remember looking into the windows of the houses as I walked by; they were so uniform that they had a hypnotic effect and in a daze I walked past the house I was to visit. Besides, they all looked the same and there was nothing to distinguish my destination from all the others. Number twenty one. I ascended the handful of almost gratuitous steps to the front door. I rang the bell which made a faint croaking noise. There was no answer and no sound of approaching footsteps. I was just about to press the bell again when the door opened.

The smell. It was the smell I most remember. It seemed to bulge out of the doorway. Damp? Mildew? Putrid meat? A smell as of a tomb, decaying. The interior of the house presented to my eyes did nothing to dispel the strange feeling of entering a tomb. The wallpaper of years ago held its death grip over the walls. The kind of paper that was popular before it was decided it would be beneficial to lighten a room rather than increase that darkness which is ever present in old houses. A darkness which, unlike that of modern dwellings, is not content to lurk in the corners but continually attempts to envelop the whole room and which flinging wide all the windows and ripping down the curtains fails to completely expel.

'You must be the young gentleman from the magazine,' stated the old lady who emerged from behind the front door.

'That's right,' I replied, 'my name is Christopher Ryland, I'm from the *Literary Review*, would you be Miss Emily Nordison?'

'Oh no,' she said, with a combined sigh and chuckle, 'no one comes to interview me. I'm Emily's sister, Elizabeth. I look after her these days. I answer the door, cook the meals and go to the post office. I try to clean as much as I can, but really it's too much for me, this big house at my age, I should have some help but we, that is Emily says we, can't afford it.'

'I hope it is convenient to see Miss Nordison, this is the time I said I'd visit in my letter?'

'Yes, oh yes. Emily can always spare some time. We're flattered that you should want to see us. We don't have many visitors these days. *We never really have,*' she added conspiratorially, 'socialising is not easy for us, we look upon your visit as a little *treat* you know. Won't you have a cup of tea before you see Emily? You must be thirsty after your journey,' she said, simultaneously turning and slowly beginning to walk down the hallway, her shine length dress stiffly waving.

There was no chance to decline the offer as I was rapidly being left alone in the open doorway. I turned and closed the door, there was a small hall table behind it and on it I could clearly see my letter of the previous week. It did not appear to have been opened and was accompanied by three or four others.

I followed Emily's sister into the kitchen where she was placing a kettle on the kitchen range. The kitchen had obviously never been modernised, with the old range filling most of one wall, another wall was dominated by a Welsh dresser on which was neatly arranged dusty patterned china. The walls themselves were painted an unrelenting dark brown.

'Is Emily out?' I asked.

'Oh no. Emily does not go out.'

'Oh.'

'Take a seat, Mr Ryland,' said the old woman, 'the kettle will take a while to boil.'

I was just about to sit down when there was a clatter from upstairs and an imperious voice called, 'Elizabeth! Who is it? Elizabeth! What is going on down there?'

Instantly a frown of disappointment passed across the old lady's face as she replied, 'it's the young gentleman from the magazine,' and punctuated by a brief pause she added, 'come to see you.'

'Is it all right if I go up and interview Emily now?' I asked.

'Send him up!' said the voice from upstairs.

I rose and walking towards the hallway enquired, 'Where is Emily?'

'At the top of the stairs turn right along the landing and it's the second door on the right,' replied Elizabeth Nordison as she removed the kettle from the hob.

I ascended the dark staircase which was directly opposite the front door. The stairs were steep and covered with a worn carpet which had become loose. I remembered thinking how dangerous it must be in a house occupied by two frail old ladies. Reaching the top of the stairs the pervasive smell of the old house seemed even thicker, as if it emanated from somewhere near. I quickly walked along the landing and knocked on the door.

'Come in.'

I opened the door and entered the room. Emily Nordison sat propped up in bed with just the eiderdown covering her legs. She wore a thick quilted bedjacket and had her hair

done up in coils. The room itself was larger than I had expected. The bed was a double, the wardrobe, imposing and bulky, was made of dark heavily carved wood. A dressing table of the same style stood against the wall at the foot of the bed, its mirror blankly mimicking the bed before it. Various other bits and pieces of furniture occupied the room, two small chairs, a bedside table and a chest of drawers. A large window looked out on the street.

'I'm Christopher Ryland from the *Literary Review*, I hope I haven't called at an inconvenient time,' I said motioning towards the bed. 'I hope you are not unwell.'

'Oh no. Take no notice of my being in bed. I am just resting from a fall. In any case I find bed a comfortable place from which to conduct my affairs,' and she gave a jerky laugh.

'I hope you won't object if I record our conversation on my cassette recorder?' I asked, pointing to my bag. 'It makes things easier and cuts down on misquotations too.'

'What should I mind? I have nothing to say anyway,' she replied rather theatrically. 'None of us have anything to say. We're all marionettes twitching to past tunes. But let us cherish the delusion. Use your machine by all means.'

I set up the recorder on the bedside table and started to cross the room to get myself a chair but the old lady said: 'don't be so formal. Not with me. Come and sit here on the side of the bed,' and she patted the eiderdown by her side. I obeyed her, carefully easing myself onto the soft quilt.

'That's better, far more cosy isn't it? You must put me at my ease. I've never done this kind of thing before,' she said coquettishly.

'Do you mean I am the first person who has arranged to interview you?' I asked somewhat surprised that I had not been preceded.

Emily Nordison's gaze became rather distant and she replied, 'Yes, no one wanted to interview me in my young days.' Then jerking her head up and smiling she said, 'you've got me quite nervous you know.'

'Oh it's not so bad, being interviewed. You'll have to get used to it now. Your "rediscovery", if I may call it that, is the literary event of the year, everyone will flock to see you now.'

'You flatter me too much.'

'Not at all. It seems amazing now that a writer of your stature could have remained virtually unknown for so long. Perhaps it has been your modesty which has kept your talent hidden for so long.'

'Modesty! My modesty is but a pale reflection of my conceit. It is not I who has "hidden my talent", it is the world that has ignored it. When my first collection of poems was published it was not even reviewed. No one really cared for what I wrote, it was not manifest enough for their first readings; its complexity was too veiled, they thought me shallow.'

'Your early writings, both poetry and prose pieces are all very distinctive, not at all like other writings of the time. It wouldn't be too misleading to say you were ahead of your time in

many respects. I'm thinking particularly of oriental sounding poems like "After the Waking", and I quickly recited the brief lines I had memorised of the haiku like poem.

'How did you come to write lines like those? Indeed, what made you become a writer at all?'

There was a lengthy silence after my question and I wondered if Miss Nordison had heard me, but eventually she spoke.

'Was that mine? I don't know any more.' She paused. The clock ticked, beating its rhythm patiently. The tape in the cassette ground on, steadily recording the silence. 'I don't know how to answer a question like that. I suppose... You see... I've always been pressed upon. People have always moulded me. I've always been "corseted". But corsets solve nothing, they just force the lump into a different place. I've always been forced into directions I never wanted to go. My writing was a way out of that. The one thing they couldn't control, and you see, it had to be different from everything else; not for the sake of novelty but because everything else was... tainted, controlled.

'At school, in my day, if you were left handed they forced you to be right handed; just like the corset, but the unsightly lump just moves elsewhere, so they developed stammers or twitches. I suppose my lump came out as writing.

'My life was planned, like one of those new towns. Everything was so planned out, it looked perfect on paper; the best of everything for the purpose. But when it finally materialises, it's a mess, a horrible, sick, silly mess. Somewhere something went wrong. But it was all so perfect, all so planned! It couldn't, it couldn't go wrong. It was all so planned it didn't stand a chance. No soul, just deformity and nightmare.

'There was no such thing as freedom for the young in my day, and precious little for adults. My father wanted me to be intelligent. God knows why, for he only saw my role in life as that of decoration. I never could get on at school. Oh how I hated mathematics! I just could not do it. It just was not me, so regimented, so determined, not my kind of thing at all. My kind of thing was wild flowers that grew where they liked no matter what people thought, what people said. People use language as a weapon but I wanted to free it of all that. But people stamp on wild flowers, or pull them up and stick them into forlorn little pots. When I think of the hours spent wrestling with my homework. All those meaningless numbers which intransigently refused to go into one another, to add up, to equate. "What are you? Stupid! Have you no brain?" my father would shout and he'd bang on the table, of course I'd get scared and couldn't think at all. Bang! would go his fist and all my thoughts, calculations, would fly out of my brain like frightened birds. And he'd keep on shouting and banging and pacing the room, till the tears rattled from my head. But to escape into words, something that had meaning - or it seemed so then - something which was free and could be played with like a doll, turned this way and that. That was something I could grasp and hold on to.

'So you see, all my writing was intuitive, my father was quite right about me, I could not think, or rather I could not reason, but to perceive and to feel, to sense the tiny indications things present to us; to hear the conversation of all things and to participate in that conversation, that was something else. But my writings, like everything else, were complete failures; forgotten, ignored, even despised. They were still born, I may as well have burned them rather than waste time on publication.'

'But now that your writings are becoming appreciated by a wider audience and attracting a great deal of critical attention does it not give you a certain satisfaction? What does it feel like seeing your works acclaimed after so long?'

A brief sigh pierced Emily Nordison's lips. It was as if a light had gone out, somewhere behind her eyes. Her skin, yellowed like the pages of an old dusty book, appeared, spotlighted in the sunlight beaming through the window, blotchy like old crumbling parchment. She looked very weary. I remember pensively wondering if the interview would prove too great a strain for her. Eventually she spoke, but when she did her voice seemed changed, distant but clearly audible, as if it was reverberating down a long tunnel.

'Someone once said there is nothing worse than delayed suffering. Everything should be suffered at its appropriate moment. They should have said there is nothing worse than delayed success.'

'Never use publication as a weapon, my boy, the recoil will knock your head off! I used to think of publication as a kind of revenge. They'll see, I used to think, they'll see how wrong they are, they'll wish they were closer to me when they see I am famous. But now it's happened there's no one to show; only strangers and they're not part of one's world. Your world only extends as far as what and who you know. And as you get older - you'll see - your world shrinks and shrinks, as the generations get more distant, as your friends and lovers - your world - die around you, your world gradually shrinks, until you know no one. And it presses itself in on you until it's the four walls of this room and stifling you with your own stench. And finally it shrinks to the size of your own coffin.'

As she spoke I experienced a mounting sense of entrapment. I looked at the door which seemed to stand like a sentry; but to what and to keep in or out? I was feeling increasingly weary, the atmosphere weighed so heavily on me that it actually felt as if my chin was being forced down onto my chest. Even to breathe was becoming a labour. The sweet tacky smell of the house seemed to get even stronger. It made me sweat, it made me choke on my words as I struggled to speak through the veil of foul air. Unsteadily I rose saying, with foolish civility, 'Excuse me, it's so hot in here, do you mind if I open the window?'

'By all means, open it as wide as you like,' she replied. The old sash cord window was stiff but I managed to get it to stay up so that half the window was open. As I opened it I briefly stuck my head out of the window and peered along the street breathing in the fresh air as I did so. It was completely deserted, nothing moved, the outside world seemed permeated

by a curious stillness as if time had stood still. As I returned to the bed I tried to continue with the interview.

'Surely it must be gratifying that your writings are at last being seriously assessed?'

'What they published just now in this, this collection. It is not mine! I have forgotten about it. It nauseates me. I do not recognise it. It is dead. It is far past. I couldn't care what happens to it and I can say nothing about it, it is no longer part of me; do you understand? It was another life ago, like a mother to her aborted child I do not wish to be reminded that it once existed. I have long since moved on and want other things to think about, to distract me from what might have been. It's all gone, it all moves on. The past is just lost possibilities trailing back like a leash.

'But you, you are the here-and-now. This, *this* is the here-and-now. The new. What counts. All that possibly could count. To live in the past is to die in the present. We must grasp and suck dry what is present to persuade us of new vitality, to propel us onto the next present. If we once lose momentum we are lost, time cannot be regained, we are dead. That is why I say to you, speak to me of the moment. All your questions are burying me, pushing me back into what is no longer.' She rose slightly and leaning forward, cupped my face in her hands, and looking into me she said:

'Your eyes are alive. They breath life. Your mouth is full and rich. Your body is a bridge to the future, strong and secure. Look at these things!' and she struggled from the bed and circled the room flinging wide the doors to the wardrobe and cabinets. From them she produced all manner of strange memorabilia. I jumped from the bed scared she might injure herself, but for some reason I baulked at approaching her.

'Look! Look at death!' she shouted, becoming hoarse in her excitement. 'Crumpled clothes, poor petty things of no use, ashtrays with views of Bournemouth, worn out shoes, broken necklaces... That book belongs among these! It is all dead skin that must be shed. And you, all you want to do, with your calculated questions is push me back into all this. Your questions are burying me alive, smothering me, filling my nose, my mouth, my eyes, suffocating.'

I stood hesitating before her, at a loss in the face of such passion. 'Come, I want to show you,' she said, her words pierced by her quivering breaths.

'Try to calm yourself,' I said. 'You are exerting yourself too much, you will make yourself ill.' But taking no heed of my words she stooped down to the floor and pulled open the long bottom drawer of her dressing table. It was full to the brim with papers, some loose and crumpled, other held together with rusty paper clips or elastic bands but all covered with an untidy, urgent handwriting. Then, with a note of triumph in her voice, she said:

'One day, when I am dead, they will ransack this room! And oh, what they will find, what they will find. That will serve them.' As I looked down into the drawer and its contents my head began to spin like a tiny boat caught in the vortex of a whirlpool. Waves of nausea

seemed to surge and pulse within me, it was as if the foul air I was breathing had permeated my whole body. The open window had not served to freshen the air in the room at all, indeed, if anything, the strange odour had become even fouler and thicker. Icy sweat plastered my shirt to my back and chest. With each breath I seemed to become weaker. Staring at the papers through sweat stung eyes they seemed to writhe and wriggle in a speckled mass like maggots in a carcass. My nausea increased and I began to feel faint. I suddenly realised that as I became weaker she was growing stronger, she was becoming more and more animated as I felt the energy ebb from my body. A signal like the jolt of an electric shock flashed through my body - I must get out! I lunged towards the door. Faintly I heard the old woman crying: 'Don't leave me! I *need* you. You're *burying* me.' I clawed at the doorknob, nearly losing my balance as the door swung open. Stumbling across the threshold I rushed along the landing to the stairs but I could no longer breathe. My hoarse rattling gasps for breath seemed to trail along behind me. I half ran half fell down the stairs and wrenching open the front door staggered down the steps to the street.

The shock as the air encircled me was like leaping through a paper hoop. Painfully I gulped down great clods of air. I staggered away from the house, stumbling over the curb and into the road but I emerged not into the familiar urban street but into a wasteland. I looked about me. The house stood alone with nothing but rubble on either side. One sometimes sees these solitary, lonesome houses standing pitifully in a street in the process of demolition, its sides, never intended to stand alone and exposed, looking naked and grotesque the interior walls of its neighbour exposed like the innards of an eviscerated animal. It is all decaying, forgotten and disused; the plaster flaking away from its facade like delicately settling ashes.