

# Come, Gentle Night

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Arthur took one look at the forlorn stranger standing by the stone wall at the base of the hill in the cool evening and thought: Gordon Comstock.

As a teacher and a wide reader of fiction, Arthur thought of literary analogies often at odd moments of the day and night, but this one seemed particularly apt. The man in the black leather jacket and worn jeans gazing up the slope of the hill, rubbing his hands together, and shivering a bit in the gust brought to Arthur's mind the protagonist of Orwell's early novel *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*. That was one of Orwell's least-read books, but Arthur thought it contained fine writing and keen observations. Yes, Arthur decided. The stranger was kind of like Gordon Comstock, the hero of a forgotten novel.

Arthur would not have drawn the parallel just on the basis of this stranger's appearance. He had a hunch as to why the man waited here all alone. Living here on Slough Road, on the upper floor of the building at the base of the hill, over the past two years, Arthur had gotten more than his fill of the neighbors who dwelt in the bigger house up the hill, toward which the stranger gazed. How Arthur wished those people had never moved in. The Waltons were crass and decadent and ugly as only the nouveau riche can be. They had been rude to Arthur and treated him as a social inferior, especially after his separation, and on a couple of occasions they had nearly killed Arthur while shooting down the hill in their sleek black Alfa Romeo as he tried to cross the street. He had jumped out of the vehicle's path just in time, landing awkwardly on the far sidewalk. Arthur wondered whether the car's occupants noticed or cared.

Gazing now at the stranger, Arthur imagined that the Waltons had done to him exactly what a snooty family in Orwell's novel does to hapless Gordon Comstock. They had issued an invitation and then canceled or changed the date without bothering to let the poor man know, leaving him to wait all alone on the fringes of their property in the cold while they were off having fun somewhere. But of course this was surmise.

Having just gotten home after a particularly demanding day at the school downtown, Arthur was ready for a pint. In the few weeks since the separation that in all likelihood would officially become a divorce, he had begun to feel desperately lonely. The thought of sitting by himself in the pub again while people around him had a good time was too painful. He approached the stranger.

“Good evening,” Arthur said.

The man looked at him, it seemed with mild surprise and a touch of annoyance, as if he thought Arthur wanted to bum something off him.

“Evenin’, sir.”

The accent wasn’t from these parts. It sounded like a Derry accent.

“Got some business here?”

“Ah, yeah. D’you know when the people who live up the hill will be gettin’ home? I mean, what time they usually do?”

Arthur laughed.

“Oh, those rich hedonists. Aren’t they some of the craziest people I’ve known in my life. They leave you in the lurch here?”

“You might say that. I thought they’d be home by now. I’ve been standin’ here a half hour already.”

“It’s sick. Ask me what I hate more than anything else in this part of the world. It’s the social snobbery. Adults who just never learned how to treat other people.”

The man nodded, then looked back up the hill toward the big house where no lights were on.

“Hey, listen, mate. It’s getting very cold out here. I’m going to the pub right across the street, if you’d like some company until they get home. We’ll sit right by the window and you’ll see the car pass by and start up the hill.”

Again the stranger nodded, with a bemused look.

“Don’t like drinkin’ alone, is that it? Hell, I could use a pint about now.”

“I’m Arthur.”

“Pleased to meetcha, sir. Robbie’s my name.”

They shook hands with vigor. Then the new acquaintances crossed the road and entered the pub, which had drawn a modest early-evening crowd. A few of the patrons gorged on greasy food and beer while some looked up at the game playing on screens around the place. They sat down at the bar. To their right the big window in the pub's façade offered a view of the road and the base of the hill. Leaning back on your stool, it was possible to see the house up the hill, the site of a party Arthur had attended months before. Arthur ordered a Guinness and Robbie asked for the same. Jim Morrison's voice came from the speakers, singing about breaking on through to the other side.

"Do you like this music, Robbie?" Arthur asked.

"Not local, but yeah. Best band ever."

"I guess I'm more of a Beatles fan."

"Oh man, I love them too. 'Norwegian Wood.' 'Paperback Writer.' 'Strawberry Fields.' 'Hard Day's Night.'"

"All good songs. But the one I keep hearing in my head is 'Got to Get You Into My Life.' McCartney said it's about smoking pot, but to my mind it's a song about meeting a person and not knowing where the experience will take you and feeling totally overwhelmed with it, in a good way."

This is how you break the ice with a new acquaintance, Arthur thought. The more highbrow references can come later. But Arthur knew that all too often he forgot to try to be relatable.

"You've got great taste, Arthur."

"You seem like a decent guy, Robbie. I'd be lying if I said I'm not curious about how you know the people up the hill."

"Fair question, mate. The man up there is friends with the boss of one of the construction firms I've worked for. I met the man at a party once."

"What did you make of him?"

"A bit of a blowhard, if you ask me, but not so bad overall."

Arthur nearly spat up his beer.

"A bit of a blowhard! Well, anyway, tell me about your construction gig. I wouldn't

have guessed. You must have some pretty damn powerful muscles beneath that leather jacket.”

“You wouldn’t have guessed? Tell me about all the other reliable sources of employment for a young bloke in this miserable country. Anyway, yes, it has made me pretty strong, though it nearly cost me my life.”

“Accident?”

“Yes, of the most freakish kind.”

Robbie held up his right arm.

“Broke my wrist in the oddest way. You’ll never guess.”

“Tell me.”

“So I’m standing with four guys at the base of this enormous tower, with the beams and rafters all bare in the sun like giant Tinker toys, and we’re talking about our work assignments for the day, and I hear this scream from the other side of the lot. It’s one of the other workers. He goes, ‘HOLY CRAP, ROBBIE, LOOK OUT!’”

Robbie said the words so loud that a few people in the pub turned their heads.

“And just as I turn around, I see this huge fuckin’ thing comin’ down, and I jump up and thrust my hand out to block it. You know what it was? A bloody toolbox from almost the very top of the structure. You have no idea how much force somethin’ gains, from a height like that. So I hit the damn thing and it sails right past the head of one of the other guys and lands in the dirt. I saved a man’s life but it broke my fuckin’ wrist.”

Arthur pondered this act of heroism, for which he knew he could find few parallels in his own life. He ordered another round for the two of them. Robbie glanced through the window at the empty street.

“You’re a hero, Robbie. I can’t say I’ve ever spent a minute in the hospital.”

“Never?”

“For my own sake, I mean. I was there for weeks on end when my dad was sick. God rest his soul.”

“Sorry about your dad, mate. Anyway, this was far from the worst injury I’ve ever gotten. My own father used to beat the livin’ crap out of me and my brothers, even for

pretty minor things like neglected chores. He was mean with the belt. And once when I broke a window and he wasn't wearing a belt, the man used a goddamn pipe to smash me in the ribs. I went in the bathroom and threw up and there was blood in the puke."

"He sounds like a monster, Robbie."

"No. Well, kinda. I don't know. He came from a certain world."

"That story about the toolbox is incredible."

Robbie grinned.

"You think I'm connin' you, dontcha? Getting a bloke to buy me a round with fake stories of heroism."

"I like your stories, though of course you could be a fabulist. Tell me another."

"I went to a pub in Derry once, a place kind of like this one. And who comes and sits down next to me but one of the loveliest beings I've ever laid eyes on in my life, and I'm sittin' there, not in my leather jacket but in a tank top, and every time she turns her head my way, I can tell she's admiring my muscles. And we start to talk and she lets me know that she recently came out of a really bad relationship, and what does she do, she holds up her left hand so I can see she's single. I can tell she likes me and finds me sexy as hell, and she keeps smiling in a coy way. So, where do you imagine things end up that evening? She lives on the upper floor of a house by the beach. She takes me into her bedroom and the kisses begin, but she keeps pausing to offer me a drink or a smoke and to show me these sketches and paintings that she's made of the beach and the ocean and the cliffs a ways off. The lady doesn't totally lack talent, but my mind is elsewhere, if you know what I mean. And finally we get back into it and really get worked up, and then I hear footsteps comin' up the stairs! The lady told me she wasn't married. Well, no, she didn't say it in as many words, but maybe you can forgive me for makin' a certain, what's the word—"

"Inference," said Arthur.

"Inference! Thanks, mate. For guessin' she was unattached. So I hear these steps comin', and luckily I'm still mostly dressed. It's only my tank top that I have to grab off the bed and pull on. And the steps are comin' and I still haven't said a word, and have no idea what to say to her or him or anyone, and so I yank open the window, and she gives me this

look that says no, don't do it, you crazy fool, you'll die. But it's like, choose your poison, right? And then the footsteps stop and the doorknob turns and I jump!"

Arthur looked at the young man in disbelief.

"And I land on the rocky slope. I come down so hard it knocks the wind right out of me and I've got about five different sprains and dislocations. But I know I can't stay there. I take off like fuck right up the coast until I know no one can see me from the house. I don't get to a hospital for three hours, and surprise, I don't have any insurance. The bills damn near cleaned me out."

Arthur drank some more beer and looked around a bit as he pondered this tale. Now the pub was fuller and a few of the young women at tables around the place had noticed Robbie. This was the best company Arthur had had in a while. He believed Robbie about the abusive dad and the falling toolbox and the broken wrist, but this tale about jumping out the window to avoid a cuckold's wrath just sounded a bit too much like a story you tell to get a rise out of people. Yet he found it hard not to admire someone who had clearly had a hardscrabble life. He just wondered what Robbie made of him.

"As I said, I've never gotten seriously injured. But please don't think I've never taken a risk or faced the possibility of harm. Quite the contrary, Robbie. I know you've heard about the troubles in these parts."

Robbie snorted.

"I'd have to have been livin' in a cave not to."

"Right. Well, I don't like to get involved but the sight of schoolgirls getting heckled and insulted, and sometimes threatened, as they walked to school was too much for me. So I went out to help escort them as they walked past those hostile crowds, and I must say the sight of grown men threatening little girls made me physically ill. At one point when things got especially bad, and there were men on both sides of the moving column jeering and flinging things at the kids, I moved right into the line with the kids and I dared the aggressors to do something. Dance with a man for a change, you know what I mean?"

Arthur thought this might impress Robbie, but the young man gave a nonplussed look.

"Well, good for you, mate. But even those of us who weren't in the thick of things then

knew that the cops were out in force, overseeing every move and every action. You can't have been in any serious danger."

Arthur had been enjoying the evening so much, developing such fondness for Robbie, and now it was as if something in the tone of this remark challenged his right to have a good time. Then again, maybe his own touchiness, not the other person's conduct, was the problem here. It would not be the first time.

Robbie appeared to take note of Arthur's momentary discomfiture. He glanced out again at the bare road.

"Hey, that's really a noble gesture you made there, mate. I guess you did put yourself in some danger, even with the police there. The larger point is that you aren't one of those heartless bastards who couldn't care less about other people's woes. You have a big heart."

"You're damn right I do, Robbie. I haven't even begun to tell you about my work in the schools and the parent-teacher association. You have no idea how much money I raise for youth activities to keep kids out of trouble, for social workers, civic organizations, legal funds. I'm eloquent, if I may say so. People listen to me when I get up and talk, and then they reach for their wallets."

Robbie replied in a tone markedly different from before.

"Now that I truly admire. And you do it in the face of all this rhetoric that says you shouldn't try to help others. I know I don't strike you as an intellectual or nothin', but I think about this stuff a fair amount. And you know, it's true, there is somethin' obnoxious about the way they demand your compassion. They pursue it and they bloody well expect it like they're collectin' taxes. 'Hey, a father of three lost his life in an accident on the road, won't you chip in? Don't be a callous bastard.' But you didn't know the bloke. You don't know what sort of human being he was. It takes a peculiar kind of mind to be able to look past the possibilities and see the humanity of a stranger or a whole bunch of strangers and act on your sense of that humanity. Your shared humanity. Know what I mean?"

"You put that beautifully," Arthur said, though he knew he was patronizing Robbie.

The young man got up and went to find the restroom. Looking around at the bright vibrant space, Arthur didn't want the evening to end. He ordered another round so Robbie

would have a fresh drink ready as soon as he came back. Then his gaze wandered and he found himself gazing in a ruminative state of mind through the window, at that house up the hill. Memories came of the party he attended, in the days before he began to develop strong feelings about the Waltons. They were new neighbors then, and the daughter had turned eighteen. Sandra, her name was. The hosts and a number of the guests wore the most elegant black garb in deference, Arthur guessed, to the girl's taste in fashion, and an ambient electronic score issued from the mikes as people milled around sipping wine. As often happened when he tried to unwind and be social, Arthur drank too much, taking one glass of prosecco after another from the roving trays, and the figures moving around him in the tastefully furnished room soon became a blur. At that early point in their acquaintance, it was not hard to believe that the Waltons were generous and outgoing, the cream of the nouveau riche who made this city feel less of a provincial place by the day. He drank and drank, enjoying the smiles and kind words from the shapes circling him, until he realized that if he opened his mouth he would make an ass of himself and the sense of fun faded.

Robbie came back and sat down again.

"Time for a third round, eh? Awfully generous of you, mate."

"No, I like your stories. I've never been in that kind of danger."

"Oh, man. That time I jumped out the window isn't even the most dangerous situation I've been in. There are some people out there, I'd honestly rather they not know where I am," Robbie said, with a look at the dark street and the base of the hill.

Now Arthur really wondered whether he should keep believing the guy, but he wanted to hear more.

"Go on."

"Here's yet another story that begins in a pub. Like many of the world's great stories, am I right? Of course it doesn't actually start there, except from a certain viewpoint—how should I put this, Arthur?"

"Except on the most immediate level."

"There you go. The most immediate level. And not only that, but the story involves another universal. A couple with some weird stuff going on."



"The same couple as in the other story?"

"No, Arthur. How creditable would that be?"

"How plausible."

"What?"

"A better way to say it is, 'How plausible would that be?' Or how credible. Not creditable."

"Ah, right. How plausible would it be. I'm not sure you find anything I've told you this evening plausible, but you are clearly amused."

"Without question."

"So, I'm in this pub called Langan's, way up north, and there's this regular there, Bill O'Keefe, and he's stormin' around the place, drunker than usual. He rants about how his fiancé left him and he would like to kill the—I'm not gonna repeat what he called her, Arthur. He's furious at her for suggestin' that Bill's no good, that he's into shady stuff, and that was why she got up and left, when really the motive was just money. To hear Bill tell it, she was money-hungry and made off with a good part of his wealth. But from what I understood, the woman said Bill had been helpin' himself to her inheritance from a rich uncle, and she wasn't gonna put up with it anymore. Bill insisted that was all lies. He was furious and he would kill any son of a bitch who came between him and what was his."

"He does sound like the man in the other story."

"You do like your comparisons. Anyway, some of us decide we can't let him cow everyone into silence. We get into a long argument about the politics of the region and which side has more blood on its hands. It's a lively exchange, as you can imagine. We argue and drink for hours until the barman kicks us out. I'm not even sure I'll make it to my car, the way things have gone with some of the crazy bastards in that place. When certain topics come up, they forget what it means to be a civilized person."

Arthur nodded.

"I'm struck with how much we have in common, Robbie. You must understand my motives in trying to protect those schoolkids, even if you don't think I did anything particularly heroic."

“Of course, mate. So, I went around all next day feeling like a marked man. It’s not a nice way to feel, let me tell you. But that’s just the beginning. On the following day, I’m driving on a lonely road way out in the country, on my way home from a construction shift. The sky’s been so cloudy so long you might forget what color it normally is. Then up ahead on the road, I spot this solitary figure walkin’ along. Not even on the shoulder but on the road, because there’s slightly less mud there. I slow down to get a look at the stranger wanderin’ out here, so far from anywhere. It’s a woman, about twenty-eight, with long dark hair and pale skin like that murky sky. And she turns and says, mister, I’ll name my first-born after you if you can take me far from here, and do it pronto. And, one more thing, please don’t ask any questions, just get me out of here. How can I say no, Arthur?”

“You’re telling it well, Robbie. I feel like I’m there on that road, meeting that woman.”

“Don’t you wish. So, she gets in and I try to keep my promise not to ask any questions. But you know I can’t hide my curiosity for too long.”

“As Henry James said, writers are always observing. And you’re a born storyteller.”

“Right. So, I keep asking her if everything’s okay, and she knows what I really want to know, and so finally she indulges me. But come on, you can guess what lurks at the back of my mind. What sense, what suspicion. She’s on the lam from Bill O’Keefe.”

“The unexpected inevitable.”

“The what? So, anyway, I happen to know of a farm about as remote as anyplace on this earth. I’m workin’ for the owner three days a week, and I have a key to a little house at the outer edge, hidden by a big row of hills. There’s a family called the Tyrells in a house nearby but that’s pretty much all. I tell her she can rest there and figure out what she wants to do. She can’t stop thanking me.”

“You acted selflessly.”

“Did I? Of course I wanted the company of a beautiful woman, maybe as badly as I think you wanted company tonight, Arthur. Anyway, like I said, she’s burstin’ with gratitude. She asks me to drive real fast. It’s clear she wants to get away from some people pretty bad. We drive through the countryside until we get to the farm and then we get out and I unlock the little house and let her in. She says, please sir, don’t open this door

for nothin' or no one. I'm gonna get cleaned up now and then if you can help me get even further away, you're an angel. So she goes inside and takes a shower and I stand guard out there, only, I don't make like I'm standin' guard, oh no, not at all. I walk around smokin' and actin' like I'm on a break from doin' the menial things I normally do there."

Robbie's eyes darted again at the big window. Still the road outside was bare.

"For about an hour, it's fine. Then a pickup pulls up and these two men I've never seen before get out, and they've both got rifles hangin' from straps, and they ask me all kinds of questions. Have I seen anyone on the road. Passed anyone, given anyone a ride. And I'm like, no, fellas, I hope everythin's all right. It's private property and they know if they force their way into the house I'll call the police. Guess they could shoot me dead, but the Tyrells are within earshot. They don't want to try to kill all of us, that's crossin' too many lines, even for thugs in the employ of Bill O'Keefe. Not once do I look at the little house. I know if I do that, they'll immediately want to go inside. But they leave. Only they don't leave. I'm smart enough not to go back to the house even when I think the truck is gone. Because I know the trick they're pullin'. And, sure enough, three cigarettes later, I see one of them lurkin' behind a tree on a hill on the far side of the road, watchin'. So I have to wait. Night will come, night will save us."

"I know exactly how you must have felt, Robbie. Waiting for night, the deliverer. 'Come, gentle night.'"

"What's that?"

"It's a quotation from *Romeo and Juliet*."

"Nice. Thank you. So, when night finally arrives, I open the door so discreetly and stand there in the dark whisperin' to her. And then she comes out and hides in the back seat of my car and I drive her right out of there to a point deep in the woods. We sleep there, in the car, me with my hand on the wheel and my foot poised on the gas. I'd be lyin' if I said certain thoughts didn't come to me, Arthur. I could tell she found me attractive. But the terror was so severe that neither of us could act on what we were feelin'. So at some point I doze off, and when I wake in the early light she's gone. The sky is much clearer than the day before, and she's gone like a wisp of smoke. But that's not the end of it."

“What, then? Maybe you heard her singing somewhere off in the woods.”

“Are you crazy? She was so desperate to get out of there. To sing would invite a bullet, Arthur. No, what I mean is, there’s more that happened to me inside. I thought of her out there, in the woods, wanderin’ in the light comin’ through the tops of the trees, looking up at God, thanking God. Alone. Free. As we were all born to be,” Robbie finished with a sweep of the arm.

“Oh, Robbie. It’s just like in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*. When Gordon and Rosemary go out into the woods and they can’t get it on. A scene that prefigures one with Winston and Julia in 1984, except it’s worse, it’s even more tragic, because Winston and Julia can connect. The malformations wrought by capitalism are even worse than socialism—oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to get on this.”

It had gotten so loud and crowded in the pub, but there were things Arthur wanted to tease out.

“I’ve got vodka and peach schnapps in my fridge,” he told Robbie.

“Sounds good, Arthur. Just give me a minute.”

Robbie hopped off his stool and went over to one of the young women who had smiled at him earlier. He talked to her, his back turned to the bar. Arthur did not hear what he said, but the woman laughed. Just then a memory came, unbidden, unwelcome, of that party months before, of forms in elegant black dress circling around the inebriated guest, who felt that giddiness that is the curse of a man who knows how badly he wants to have fun. Then the waiters pushed carts out onto the floor and guests began to take an interest in the heaps of white powder made available to mark the birthday of the household’s youngest member. A few of them turned to the guest. Do you party this way, Arthur?

These days Arthur thought of himself as akin to the great critic Lionel Trilling. He had an ambiguous relationship to drinking, but could do it with enough élan to prove he was cool. Robbie seemed to think so. Robbie must know he was not anything like those evil people up the hill who flaunted their wealth and wallowed in excess to no end.

Minutes later Arthur opened the door of his flat and they walked inside. When the light came on, the brightness of the pristine white spaces hurt his eyes a bit. Robbie took in

everything with admiration. Arthur went to the fridge and poured a couple of drinks, and then he and Robbie stood by the tall window that looked out on the house up the hill.

"I can't really tell you what I'm feeling right now. Two strangers have met and bonded on the fringes of those awful people. I don't think you know how awful they are. They don't even bother to keep you up to date about plans. Who treats a guest that way?"

"Nope. All I was told was, go and meet that bugger at the last house on Slough Road, Tuesday at 6:00 p.m."

Arthur had a strange unnamable feeling as he looked at the stranger.

"Ah, Robbie."

"Yeah?"

"This is the last house on Slough Road."

"What?"

Robbie appeared faintly startled.

"That house up the hill is on Holly Crescent. Slough Road ends here."

Robbie had a blank look, and then his features curved into a broad grin.

"Oh, now it all finally makes sense."

"Come again?"

Everything in Arthur's torso felt ten times heavier than normal. He dropped his glass and shards burst across the polished floor.

"You shoulda frisked me before you let a stranger into your flat, Arthur my boy."

"We're not strangers, Robbie. We're friends. Moved by the same spirit of decency—"

"And charity. Right. I know exactly who you are now and why they sent me to find you. The legal funds that you raise money for finance the defense of loyalists who blow up buses and kill the organizers of charities that feed the desperately poor families here in the north. They're animals."

"Robbie—"

"Animals, Arthur! Bloody beasts. The only thing worse in this whole world is a man who dares put his tongue to work to raise cash for them. You, sir, are scum. Vermin. Human filth."

Arthur lost control of his bowels, too terrified even to scream.

“I almost forgot to thank you for the drinks. Let me do that right now,” Robbie said, just before reaching into his jacket.

Only now did Arthur realize just how lean his guest was and how much space was in there. □