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The Holy Man
and Other Stories

A Being of Distances

IT WAS BEHIND NOW – the station, the yellow steam. The train moved slowly out of the terminus, sidled against signalboxes, abandoned trucks, and then, incongruously, where a wall fell away, against palely lit windows in a tenement. Glimpses of rusted gutters, of garish wallpaper – but there was life there, or it was curtained off and not to be seen: hoardings, *Gordon's Gin*, *Aspro*, *Sandeman's Fine Old*... until he felt the train pulled away again by the rails into a new direction.

It was nearly dark, and the old man whose face had aged in the last half-hour and with whom he had walked along the platform was in the past, beyond him.

Soon then the spokes of the city rotated and fell away from the carriage window, and gradually an uneasiness in his own body, the rhythm of the wheels on the rails came to him – his mind on his father without image – and then from somewhere ahead, like a hound straining at a leash, the thin scream of the engine as it thrust more quickly into open country.

He stretched his legs and noticed the mud in the crevices of his shoes. The girl sitting opposite was wearing a red coat. He noticed that first, and then the dull turnip-like sheen of her heavy legs and the self-conscious feet in shoes of worn black suede. Tired feet, arched whitely, awkward. A spent match lay beside her left foot. He did not look up – he was conscious that he was pretending to look at the carriage floor – and soon the legs became merely a lustre on which he was aware of the fine sensitive antennal quality of hairs. He was sorry then that he had stepped onto the train.

For his father would be alone now. And soon he would turn on the light in his room and be alone. But in the end – her legs were crossed at the knees, her black skirt where the coat fell apart was drawn tightly above the kneecap against the flesh – in the end, it would always be like that: no intrusion of his own would alter it. To get to a man it was necessary to accept his premises, and with his father that had been impossible. He had been unable to say “It won’t be long”, because he was sick of his own voice, of dissimulation, and anyway both he and his father had known – “Next time it will be for me” – when they glanced at each other that afternoon at the grave of the uncle.

The coffin had brass fittings and smelt of varnish. It had been supported by scrubbed deal-wood trestles in the middle of the room, the “blue” room, and had dominated the room as an altar dominates a small church, blue pillars, and over it all was the smell of flowers and death and varnish – like the

smell of cider apples, he had thought – which set the mourners at a distance from the dead man far more utterly than his mere dying had. The smell pervaded the whole house, met one at the door, and as the mourners arrived in their white collars and black ties, shaking their hands, talking in hushed tones, nodding to others distantly known, it had descended on them, crystallizing their emotion, and drawn them inexorably towards the room given over to death.

In the room he had glanced from the waxlike face of the dead man upwards at the tall blue curtains with their faded silver flowers, trying to recognize again the familiarity of ten years before, when, down from the university, he had sat there on one of the blue chairs and told his uncle that he would no longer be interested in accepting an appointment with the firm. The uncle, a man nearing sixty at the time, showed no surprise – like father, like son, Philip's child – said shortly

he was disappointed: "...thought you'd turn out more like *our* side of the family" – and when Christopher did not reply: "but you seem to have made up your mind..."

"Yes," Christopher said, "it's quite definite."

"I'm sorry about that," his uncle said, "and in spite of our differences I think your father will be disappointed too." He had felt like saying then that it was not for his father that he was doing it, not even for the *other* side of the family, but at that moment for his father, who had felt bitter against the uncle and against Jack and Harry... Harry who brought to everything his soul of a piano accordion.

Now, in the room beside the dead man, and his gaze falling from the long blue curtains, he had felt no bitterness, only perhaps a vague sense of disgust and a strong desire to be outside in the open street and away from the cloying sacramental odour of flowers and death in the suburban room.

Neither he nor his father had been invited to be pall-bearers. They had watched from a distance as the coffin was lowered into the grave, tilting, from silk cords, and then, following the example of others, they had each thrown a handful of dirt and cut grass on the lid of the coffin – a flat hollow sound from distended fingers, rain on canvas; did the dead man hear? Afterwards, the group of mourners stood back and the clergyman led a prayer: a small man with a bald head who had donned his trappings at the graveside – and when, without music, he had broken nervously with his small voice into the 121st Psalm and the mourners had taken it up, their voices ineffectually suspended like a wind-thinned pennant between earth and sky. Christopher glanced directly at his father, and for a second they had understood one another.

His father dropped his gaze first, almost involuntarily, and Christopher looked beyond the mourners

across the green slope, where the grey and white gravestones jutted upwards like broken teeth.

After the prayers and the singing, the two workmen moved forwards self-consciously and threw the earth back into the grave, and the long block of raised earth was covered with wreaths. The clergyman shook hands with the family, muttered an apology and went with his little leather case alone down the path without looking back.

Harry was there, puffy and self-important as usual, and Jack as though now that their father was buried they had noticed him for the first time, and there was talking and questions: how was he? Were things going well? Lucky devil to live abroad these days! Over-hearty, evasive. Was it not funny how everything had turned out differently, not as one expected? And he supposed they were referring to his clothes, informal and beginning to be threadbare – poor old Chris, gone the way of his father – his general air of anonymity.

“Come and see us before you go,” Jack had said vaguely, but he was already signalling to his wife that he would join her in a moment. “Don’t forget now, old man, Catherine would *love* to hear all about your travels, always talking about you. See you soon then – before you go, Marco Polo, eh? – sure, and give my regards to your father, do.”

“You should have told him to keep them” – and Christopher looked round, and his father was standing at his elbow – small, grey, inconspicuous – and he said again: “You should have told him to keep them, Christopher. Why should I accept his regards through you?”

“Forget it, Dad. They’re not worth thinking about.”

“The last time any of them spoke to me was fifteen years ago, nine years after your mother died. It was on Armistice Day. I remember, because I bought a poppy..”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“There’s a reception,” his father said. “We were not invited.”

“Would you have wanted to go anyway?”

“Not really, no.”

“Well, then.”

“Next time,” his father said when they were alone, “it will be for me.”

“I’ll be back soon. I promise.”

He had thought then that it was hardly a lie; there was no way of knowing.

They lingered after the other mourners were gone, walking along the gravel footpaths between the graves, and the grave of the uncle with its covering of bright wreaths was nearly out of sight.

“Your mother was buried here,” his father said. “Would you like to see the grave?”

“Not particularly,” he said after a moment’s hesitation.

“You’ve never visited it.”

“No. I never have. Would you like a drink?”

“It’s just as you wish,” his father said without looking at him, “but I thought as we were here anyway...”

“No, Dad. I don’t want to.”

Springtime, he was thinking. To be in England. Casually he stooped to pick up a broken flower which had fallen on the path. It was quite fresh.

“From a wreath,” his father said.

“Probably.”

They walked slowly, in silence, and the sky was low and white-grey, like milk which has stood for a long time in a cat’s saucer collecting dust, and as he looked up he felt a raindrop on his face. “Looks as though it’s going to rain,” he said.

“I come here every month,” his father was saying. “Sometimes I miss a month, but not often. It’s the least I can do.”

In Christopher the impulse to say something died. He glanced at him, but his father avoided his eye,

and there was a faint flush on his cheeks. It was as though his father had said: “I’m old now, Chris, you must understand” – said that and not the other thing, which was not important and which was not really what he had wanted to say. And Christopher wanted to put his arm round him and to say “We’re like one another, Dad” – does he expect me to? – but he could not make the gesture.

His father was looking at him uncertainly.

“I’ve sometimes wondered, Chris, why you didn’t go into the business – your uncle’s, I mean.”

“Have you?”

“You’d have been independent today. Take Jack and Harry.”

“I *am* independent.”

A gust of wind then – how naked the cemetery was!

“Of course. I know,” his father said. “But you know what I mean.”

“Money?”

Coughing, “And position, you know. Your cousins are both in good positions now.”

“Do you envy them?”

“Who? Me?”

His father’s laugh sounded false and forced. Christopher looked away at an urn on a pillar of white marble; the inscription was in Latin... *in vitam æternam*,* he read.

“You know that’s not true, son.”

“Why bring it up then?” He added more quietly: “I don’t like them, and I don’t like talking about them.”

“It’s just as you wish,” his father said. “I didn’t mean to upset you, Chris, you know that. It’s just that sometimes... well, I think it was your birth-right. Your mother was his sister, after all.”

“And you’re my father.”

He had meant it to be a statement of fact only, but his father had crumpled and his mouth had fallen open. Then he had had an

impulse to explain himself to his father – he would not have had it otherwise, at no point would he gladly have gone back on the past, didn't he see? – but he would not have understood. “We're alike, son, you and I.” He might have said that. His son, after all. The second generation.

“I realize, of course,” his father said at last, “that I've stood in your way. You shouldn't have let me, Chris.”

He would always believe that – my son, my world – holding on to them like men held on to their dead, with words and memories of words. *Perducat nos in vitam æternam.**

He found himself saying: “You needn't blame yourself, Dad. You didn't really stand in my way” – and he was going to add: “It wasn't you who decided me, not at all”, but the smile of disbelief was already there, like a visor over the eyes.

They walked on.

And now he noticed that his father's hat looked too big for him. It did not fit him. And he took his father's arm.

"Your hat's too big for you, Dad!"

The old man laughed. "Can't afford another, Chris! D'you know, when I bought my first hat, they cost twelve and six – the best, mind you. The same hat costs sixty-two and six today. The cheap ones are no good, no good at all... *This* is a Borsalino."

A Borsalino. His father had halted, removed his hat and pointed with his forefinger at the discoloured silk lining (pomade, a little jar of green stuff in the bathroom cabinet). "Borsalino. Made in Italy. You see?"

"Must be a good one."

"The best," his father said.

They were walking towards the main gate of the cemetery.

The cortège had already broken up, and the last of the cars was gone. The gate porter nodded to them as they walked out onto the street.

“I suppose those shops do good business?” Christopher said to his father, referring to the row of shops which sold graveside ornaments and flowers. “Like bookstalls in railway stations.” A point of departure.

“Capital,” his father said. “I bought a vase there once for your mother’s grave, but one day when I went back somebody had broken it. That’s over two years ago now... yes, must be that at least.”

“And shells,” Christopher said.

“Yes. You can buy shells with inscriptions.”

“Pink ones,” Christopher said, and he smiled, but his father was looking straight ahead and walking quickly, as he always did on the street, and he seemed to have forgotten what they were talking about.

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