

All in honour, part 4

Five Senses

It was very quiet in the gallery; there was space and peace to stand and stare. Ravishing colours, sensuous lines, smooth marble, polished wood. He was absorbed by it.

On the way out he passed Rodin's *The Kiss* and stopped to admire the extraordinary beauty of this tender, loving embrace.

Outside, the light on the river had changed from grey to a dull yellow. To the right the sky was still bright, but looking up towards Westminster, a black sky showed a storm approaching. He debated whether to walk all the way back to Trafalgar Square – towards the storm – or to go by the shorter route round to Pimlico Station and take the underground. Summer storms in London took some beating. It had been a stifling morning and he was only in shirt sleeves; he decided to make for the tube. It made no difference, a rising wind announced the arrival of the storm before he had got very far, and cold soaking rain began to saturate his hair and shirt; it bounced up from the pavement drenching his trousers and filling his shoes. Stinging hail decided him that discretion was the better part of valour and he took refuge under a porch in one of the rundown terraces in the area to wait it out. His clothes clung to his skin; he began to feel cold and wrapped his arms round himself.

The gutters were rushing with water, carrying bits of street detritus away and generally cleansing the roadway. The smell of rain was an improvement on the dusty odours of a hot day. It was quiet. No cars, no people – or, at least, only one. He heard someone running through the rain, only partly visible under an umbrella. Whoever it was stopped. He glanced down, and a familiar face looked up at him, her green eyes meeting his blue ones, as she cried his name. "I don't believe it! It *is* you!" she said, climbing the steps to join him under the ineffectual cover of the porch.

"Yes, it's me," he agreed, laughing his surprise.

"How, why? – Oh cariad, how lovely to see you!" She clasped his arm and exclaimed, "You're soaked. You'll catch your death. You must come home with me and get dry."

"Do you live round here then?"

"Yes, it's not far."

The light turned greenish as the storm arrived overhead; there was simultaneous thunder and lightning, while the rain became torrential and the noise drowned their words. The porch made a useless shelter as they tried to talk.

"I heard you resigned," he said, between crashes of thunder. "What are you doing now?"

"I went back to the British Council. It's a bit safer, and doesn't test your loyalties so much," she said seriously. "What about you? Are you on an operation, or shouldn't I ask?"

"No, I resigned too. I'm here to expand my colleague's fashion house into London."

The expression of disbelief on her face made him laugh again. "It's true. When I resigned, I was staying with a friend in Paris who has had her own fashion house for more than thirty years. She's been training me."

“Gosh.” She stared at him. “Quite a change for a trained killer, then – the last person I would have imagined – but now I look at you, I can see you’ve become very stylish, even soaked to the skin.” Feeling his wet arm again, she discovered how cold he was. The porch was little protection. The worst was passing, though the rain continued heavy.

“Come, never mind the rain – you can’t get any wetter – let’s get you dry and warm you up a bit.”

They ran through the rain and puddles and a few minutes later were outside a similar house in a similar terrace, now both wet. “My flat is on the second floor – it’s a shabby old house, I’m afraid, but the flats are cheap to rent.” She pulled out her keys. “Croeso – Welcome. Come on in,” and he allowed himself to be pushed into the hallway.

The house had the characteristic smell of long-neglected buildings in post-war London: a compound of coal gas, stale cooking smells, and pervading damp. He followed her up the stairs and was relieved to find that her flat was clean and bright, unlike the dark, dusty, communal hallway and staircase.

She went to find towels and returned with a bath-sheet large enough to wrap himself in. His fingers were cold and fumbled on the buttons of his shirt. She watched critically and then took over, and helped to strip his shirt from his shivering flesh. He was dripping water everywhere, from his fair hair, darkened with the rain and plastered to his forehead, to his trousers and socks. She gave him another towel and he dried his hair, while she wrapped the big towel round him and rubbed at his chest and back. Then she went to strip off her own wet clothes.

She returned in a dressing gown, her short hair spiky from the towel. He was standing in the middle of the room, still partly clothed and shivering. “I think you’ll have to take the rest off, you really are very wet,” she said, rubbing his torso again to warm his skin. “I can’t offer you a hot bath just at the moment, but I put some money in the meter when we came in. It won’t be long.” She glanced at the window; the rain was still beating on it, cooling the room. “The towel is big enough to keep you decent and warm, so why don’t you strip off and I’ll make some coffee. Are you hungry?”

It was one of the less necessary questions.

When she returned with a tray, he was sitting cocooned in the towel, his wet clothes lying on the floor on the smaller towel. “I’ll hang it all up to dry,” she said. “The kitchen’s had the sun on it all morning, so they might dry quite well if I get the worst out with the towel. We can brush and press them later – got to keep up your image.” Relaxed under her teasing, he met her smile fondly with his own, remembering how easy she was to be with. She hadn’t changed at all. “Can’t do much with the shoes, though,” she was saying.

While she was dealing with his clothes, he took advantage of what she had brought in. Coffee and a plate of ham sandwiches (“it’s all I’ve got, sorry”) were very welcome. When she came back she rubbed her hand over his shoulder and down his arm experimentally. “Still cold? I think the water will be hot enough by now for a bath.”

She was still in her dressing gown when he emerged a short time later, wrapped in the bath sheet. “Better?” she asked.

“Much better. But you could sit next to me and help to complete the process.” He sat down and held his arm out. “Just like old times,” she said slipping down beside him and into his arm.

Heads close, they talked. About the past; how much they had missed each other; about why they had each resigned. He spoke bitterly about it, and his arm tightened round her. She relaxed into his body, breathing the scent of his skin and slipped her own arm soothingly round him under the towel, gently caressing his back and the scars she could feel under her fingers. “I can’t guarantee your honour, if you do that,” he said, turning in her arms.

“My honour has always been safe with you, cariad,” she said, looking into his eyes. “And my bed is comfortable.”

The storm passed without their noticing; warm sunshine poured in through the bedroom window and over two slender bodies wrapped in tender, loving embrace.

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Note

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[Series title “For nought I did in hate, but all in honour.” Othello: Act 5 sc. 2]