

The Breath of Enlil

For a considerable time the fine green gabardine overcoat, hat and gloves had stayed in the dark, out of the yellow flicker. The wearer of these exquisite items steadied himself against the railings. This was a black night, no moon, only dim light leaking from an electric haze thrown up far behind on Broad Street and forwards just the dancing night lamps of the tugs, skiffs and lighters illuminated the waterway. From time to time, a partial Morse code could be seen transmitted out across the floor of a warehouse, the jumbled message from a Watchmen's lantern passing the doorways and windows on his evening rounds.

Encircling the rotunda building, the north entrance to the pedestrian stairway of the Rotherhithe tunnel, the darkness only allowed a ring of gas lamps to wrestle any lambency from its grasp and the figure was clearly intent on staying out of the way of these sentinels and their incandescent umbrella. If there was anywhere else along the river this figure could have hidden, he would have most surely taken it.

For a city containing so many people and with so much life in such continual bustle, even at this hour still playing out on the working river in front of him, the paralysing isolation the figure was experiencing had easily located him. As one had to then, there were standards to maintain even when hidden, and if you could have seen them, only his eyes would have informed you of their bleak interior. It was not by chance that the wearer of the fine gabardine overcoat found himself looking out onto the Thames. Across the river, somewhere farther south there could be located a fine collection of deserted rooms that he still regarded as a home. Tonight in his thoughts, seemingly more distant than the short train ride to his elegant abode actually was. The steep slipway behind the entrance to Shadwell lock was closer, inviting for all the wrong reasons, he had already contemplated the route that it was offering. Down to the river bank and out with the low tide, to beyond any earthly issues.

His business had failed, as had his marriage; there were accusations being made in polite society directed his way that were too heinous to consider and then there was the war. The spirit of the country had hardened for non-nationals. What was left of the company he had built up had recently been commandeered for the greater need; lives, machinery and the last chance to recover his losses disappeared as the scandal broke. His shame was not just confined to his own failure, that evening the Illustrated News carried a description of the train crash at Quintshill, an awful loss and provided what details it could on the conflict back in France. Such a pointless waste. He had struggled all evening trying to comprehend how the campaign was allowed to continue. Carelessly in his malaise, ignoring how the liquor that he consumed to numb his pain, had also fuelled his descent into the lower pools of feelings.

The evening had been spent in Limehouse at The Grapes public house on Narrow Street. Despite its reputation as a dockers haunt, the landlord was friendly enough at first, welcoming his finely dressed guest through into the small back-room lounge bar. Tonight he had exiled himself to the East, in past times he could remember more lubricated nights in the West End. This was not one of those, he was here to hide. As the evening drew on, the man discovered he was only able to hide from others and not himself. Succeeding only in eventually losing himself to as much hard liquor as the landlord allowed the stranger to purchase. Just after Ten, the landlord decided he had consumed enough and escorted his patron through the packed front bar to the disregard and jeers of the locals. An unusual sight, such a gentleman, falling across the seat backs and collapsing through the coat stand, before the tail of his green gabardine overcoat licked the door frame goodbye as he stumbled into his own diabolical night.

Staggering with as much dignity as he could manage, the dark shadows of the thin warehouse streets held onto the man's pride more than he could, whilst he concentrated on staggering towards the tunnel, the station and home. Sickly weak human needs intervened at the tunnel entrance and what decorum remained was dispatched overboard into the darkness and river below. Here the railings at least offered respite from any further turmoil.

In the dimly lit nightscape the man in the gabardine overcoat found his hell. His world was descending far deeper than the steps under the river. There could be no honourable way out but to extinguish this existence; the war, the pain and the incessant evil of those who had sort to corrupt his marriage with their retched claims. If God still had claim to this realm then he had surely abandoned it. At a time when men did not cry, one tried not to, but found he had little choice. His hands involuntarily trembled as they gripped the railings and a quiet prayer was heard, not just for his own extinction but for the secession of all the pain, in all the places. His thoughts in that bleakness had started to spin in a St Vitus dance and so he did not hear the strangers approach.

Though a slow calm whisper of Spanish brogue. The stranger enquired if the man in the fine green overcoat needed assistance, which he clearly did, and when no answer came, the stranger introduced himself as the Argentine Javier Sarmiento. He was travelling through the port, bound for home and had heard the gentleman's commotion.

The Argentine's arrival startled the man back to the world from his tortuous thoughts and for a few brief moments let him consider his stupidity; this conversation might cost him more than his wallet. It would be timely, considering the foolishness that brought him here, he might have been followed from the public house. The Gentleman decided that if so, he deserved the outcome, he would welcome this moment quietly with what self respect was left. He would welcome the fatality the hands of the Argentine would bring, if he were a bloody brute, or he would passively accept the cold stab of his weapon, piercing wool, silk and flesh, when it came.

This was not how the Argentine wanted the meeting to be. Through half picked English the offer of help was repeated and a statement included that no physical harm was to come to him that evening. There was to be more to the meeting than robbery. The Argentine explained himself quickly, he was from Chubut, the Welsh settled province in Patagonia and had been away a long time. The information left his Argentine lips as it had clearly done many times before, a polished well practised delivery. In his Anglo-Spanish the gentleman was "jihs" friend, though the gentleman was yet to decide. The warmth in the Argentine's voice echoed the heat the man had felt in his time in Buenos Aires. A far distance from this evening, he reflected turning up his woollen collar, but it was a reminder of a period where there was a future to look forward to letting the feelings of saudade embrace him and he allowed Javier to continue.

After almost twenty years travelling, he had been all over the world. In his explanation for being in London and for being out on such a dark night, he remarked that he, Javier, understood the man's pain. For this the Argentine received the firmest rebuke from the man in the gabardine overcoat, the comment distancing the two men and reminding one that this could still be a robbery, or worse, an approach of the darker kind that had only been previously encountered in his early travels aboard ship. The Argentine with palms held up insisted with comfort and calm, "No my friend" he continued, "in you I hear it, I feel it, I want to help you get what you want". In his Spanish whisper he persisted, unfolding the twine of a tale that stretched back decades into Patagonia.

Javier Sarmiento told of a night decades ago, a mirror evening where the well of souls sat firmly on only his shoulders. "I had been in the Hotel Del Globo, home, in Trelew, thinking similar thoughts from the bottom of a bottle of caña. I was about to leave for home when I was approached out of the dark by a man who identified himself as the priest Martinez. He told me the same thing that I will tell you" Javier advised, "The priest Martinez

had sought me out that evening, because he could feel my suffering, as I have sought you out my friend.”

“I had wanted to end it all that night” Javier bluntly spit out the harboured thoughts of the man in the gabardine overcoat, “I was young, I had a wife and child, then not,” he trailed off... “I wanted the torture to end, the dark pressure to cease with the world extinguished. The priest Martinez said he could help, if I gave him my confession and received his gift. What did I do, it was a dark time, I said show me - The words that he spoke to me that evening calmed my fired soul, he talked not of something, but in a manner I now know of, then it was like magic, but he was a priest. It was not just his words my friend, He carried with him this item.”

The Argentine held a cloth wrapped item the size of a small bible. With one hand clasping, the other unfolded the leaves of material before he stepped back into the corona of the nearest lamp, illuminating his shadow enough to show the man the little stone ampule in his hand.

“In here is the answer to what you are looking for.” Javier Sarmiento spoke the words with hushed intent. “The priest Martinez told me it came from antiquity, through Rome and Egypt, from the Sumer and before that Uqbar. I was told it contains the breath of a God. Any more about this item I do not know. The Priest only said that it was not our holy father. It becomes from a time before that. I can tell you that it has been carried by many masters, before the priest it belonged to a Dutch school teacher, before that a great female Opera singer, before that a Prussian general and before... Who knows. The stories told by our forefathers now hold the names of these people. It has had many journeys and has helped many of us who have held your thoughts. I am its current master and I think that you will be the next.”

For the first time in their meeting the man in the fine green gabardine overcoat regained some of his lost poise and pointing at one end of the container enquired about the mass of wax sealing the lid.

The Argentine answered with great authority “As I say my friend It has never been opened. I was told it should never be. We have all unwrapped it, all of us that have carried this thing. But the warning I tell you, I was told too. This is just a stone vessel sealed only with wax and it has been resealed may times, but never opened. The priest told me that whatever is inside the vessel will bring the darkness that you are seeking. There are ancient stories that tell of a great storm that wasted Sumerian cities, foul winds commanded by the lord of their sky. I have met the men who have read such scrolls and maybe this phial is connected. If you possess it, you can open, you can see if there falls a great storm to the world with your hand at the centre of it.”

From outside the arc of the gas lamp, the overcoat shook as the man inside it laughed at this preposterous notion, but the Argentine did not seem perturbed. He remained silent as the other man tried to ease his uncertainty at where the conversation had taken him with a confident, but false guffaw.

Calmly Javier Sarmiento held his hand cradling the vessel towards to the shadows in offering. It was then that a green sleeve braved the light, reaching out to delicately contact the ampule with the first and second fingers. For the first time the man in the gabardine overcoat understood the claims of the Argentine. It was not that he could hear, the commotion from the river a constant drone, his ears were now secondary as were his eyes, he could feel, at first the great calming force of the Argentine, but then in his darkness there was anger, further than that, from behind, a sense of fear that was not his own. Out in the river from a dancing lantern, a tide of loneliness washed over him, quickly after, happiness caught him like a fine vapour carried down from back up on the road. This heady draft mixed with what alcohol was still left in his system, his head span and leaning over the railings, the gabardine overcoat hid back in the shadows and vomited.

With moments the feelings passed and became more bearable. The Argentine with one hand patted him on the back attempting to ease his physical distress and with the other, clasped the item tightly within his guardian hand.

“You see,” the Spanish accent whispered, “When you carry it, you feel things, not just your own pain, you feel others too. You feel their sadness as much as your own, but you also feel their elation and their happiness. In carrying the item you become aware of those that are around you and if you decide that they are not worth it, that your pain is the greatest over theirs, then here, you have the power to make it stop.”

“This is the choice the Priest Martinez offered to me and I am here now with you a changed man” The Argentine concluded whilst in the half shadow the mass of bent over coat became a man once more. “If I give it to you,” Javier continued, “you can have what you desire tonight, but you will also know what you will be sacrificing of others around you, it will help you I am certain of it. I have carried it for forty years and now I have seen enough - You need to know.”

The man dressed in the green gabardine overcoat, hat and gloves, stepped out of the shadows and began to speak, telling the Argentine his confession, what he had done, his fear, his failure, his disgrace and the name of his lover and the Argentine listened to each word. When his testament was complete Javier once more held out the cloth wrap, with the words, “and now take it and understand”.

Accompanied by only a deep breath, with the item clasped firmly in his fist, the man who now possessed a cleaner conscious returned to face his dark, the deep black. From within his hole, he became accustomed to the voices of a million people of London; the pain, the anger, the weeping loss, the disappointment, the hatred, the blinded wraith. The oppressive sadness of a mass left behind for war, he felt it all. No black can be this black. And it was not, from the darken shadows, snaking through the ether, a fine illuminate mist of joviality, escapant from the evenings social pleasure at The Grapes, reached him and black became grey. Without forewarning then came a bright piercing shard of laughter and happiness, the birth of a child. The headiness of new life reminded his being of the night’s excess and it made him empty his stomach once more. The Argentine Javier Sarmiento quietly watched and again offered the sole comfort of a few flat hand pats on the back of the green gabardine overcoat and informed the man retching inside of it, that it would get better, but perhaps he should not drink so much in future.

They stayed there until daybreak, one making sure the other could stand and face the new day. The Argentine accompanied the gentleman through the next week, making sure he could live with the item. On the 1st of June, They both sailed from Portsmouth as far as La Rochelle and from there one started on his way back into the world and the other started home. At their last meeting they new that they would never see each other again, because by that time one of them knew the other reason why they met, the purpose of the long voyage to a home land and nearing of a long desired family reunion.

My name is Phillippe Grovayne and one evening in 1915, at my most darkest point I prayed for an end of existence, thankfully my prayer was not answered, instead I was sent the Argentine Javier Sarmiento and the vessel that is said to contain the breath of the god Enlil. He it carried then, and I carry now. It is no lucky talisman, I have known many difficult times, fate has continued to navigate my vessel into tumultuous storms and onto rocky coasts. But in my journeys I have always understood the responsibility I have, by the connection to those around me. There is always light and no dark has ever been as black as that May night, no other night in sixty three years.

I am please that I have found you this evening my friend, admittedly the time and the place are very different... but is the beginning of my story not one like yours? As the

Argentine and the Priest Martinez before him, and the others before them. I can see that you need this now, more than I.