

The Delicate Structure of Bones

John Irving Clarke

Call it out for what it is. They were gathering around Nicky again. The Wolf Pack, with nothing better to do, they were glad of the distraction, glad of the chance to sneer at the clothes which had been bought too cheaply, the guile-less attitude without a trace of cynicism and the general lack of cool. But the thing which riled them most of all was the delicate structure of bones.

That Nicky's face was a face to hold gently like a bird, was a truth they could never admit. The province of the Wolf Pack was the territory of random violence where any slight provocation would always be welcomed and seized upon. The smack of flesh upon flesh, the crack of bone upon bone and the satisfactory drawing of blood; their abiding intent was to diminish anything which threatened to rise above their own base level. Now, it was Nicky's turn to pay the penalty for being different, for daring to be.

"Everyone warned me not to go in there. *It's scary*, they said. *It's frightening*, they said, *there's a monster in there... I dare you*, they said. And there I was, about to climb through the fence and enter the Forbidden Forest."

"What are you on about? Is this more of your bloody stories?"

To be different is a risk. To stand out from the crowd is to court unwelcome attention and yet, somehow, my *difference*, my telling of stories granted me a free pass.

"The moon disappeared behind a cloak of cloud." I said by way of further explication.

"I stood in the darkness listening to the shrieks, cries, whispers and moans. *Don't go into the forest*, they'd said and now I stood, barely beyond the grasp of barbed branches as sinister footsteps shuffled my way. I'd thought I was brave; I'd thought I could take on the dare, but now, all I knew was that my insides had turned to mush."

"I couldn't move, my legs were weak. Footsteps; closer and closer. My throat seized up and my breathing stopped. A figure emerged from the gloom and stood within an arm's reach. He turned directly towards me. Could he see in this darkness better than I could?"

"He spoke in a language I didn't understand, his voice hoarse, beyond comprehension. He reached out and stroked my cheek before he spoke again. 'You've been told, you've been told. Haven't you been told not to enter the Forbidden Forest?' His tone was not unkind, the fingers brushed down the side of my neck towards my throat. 'But if you must, then you must. I was always too keen on insisting *thou shall not*. Not only me, but those before me and those after. *Thou shall not*. But it is *thou shalt* which charges the greater learning.'

My eyes were becoming accustomed to the light and the figure before me was more easily discerned. His black cloak, so inappropriate for hacking through that forest in the night, and those mutton chop whiskers which were worn for a bet, right? Or a bid for eccentricity.

But he was speaking to me again now in earnest. 'This is the voice of regret. How could you, young people learn under such constraints? We, or I, should have encouraged exploration, should have employed the smile and not the frown.'

He was beginning to lose me and maybe he knew that as he tried to make his meaning clearer. 'We shouldn't have prohibited love.' And, as though he had exhausted himself, he slipped back again into the dark forest."

"The following morning, I laughed it all off with my friends. It was nothing I told them. *I met your dare and entered the Forbidden Forest. I wasn't scared at all.*"

A weak ending, I know, but I hadn't had a lot of time to prepare this one.

"Is that it? You're a weirdo you, do you know that? Is that the ending?"

"Er, yeah, I think so," I told them. "Think of the Forbidden Forest as a sort of metaphor."

Fiction

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The University of Sheffield's
Creative Writing Journal

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“Whooh! Get this: think of it as a metaphor!”

This one had had hardly been worth listening to. They drifted off in a malign search for someone else on which to spill their bile. So, there was no story and no drama. Bells would ring, crowds would disperse and doors would close. The world would move on.

Except Nicky stood before me. Gentle, fragile Nicky who had more spirit than the pale face and the deep violet eyes would suggest.

“I know what you did there.”

“Stories. It wasn’t one of my best, was it?”

“I dunno. I liked it. Who was the bloke? Where did he come from? How does it end? What happens?”

“Not sure. How do you think it should end?”

Nicky looked around at the emptying hall and corridors. If this meant being late, it didn’t seem to matter. Then the face was turned back to me. Full gaze, no hiding away from it. “I don’t think you should be alone in the Forbidden Forest. You should have someone with you.”

“You don’t think I should be alone. *Me?* It’s not me, it’s a story. Stories are made up; the characters and the situations are all made up; they’re all lies.”

“Yeah, lies which point to the truth. What is the Forbidden Forest anyway?”

Now, I *did* know the answer to this one. The Forbidden Forest was the secret territory which we were banned from entering, a place of danger, a place of delights, a place reserved for those who think they knew it all. “The Forbidden Forest is okay,” I said, “It’s a place where you make your own decisions and stand by the consequences.”

“Then let’s do it.” Nicky was resolute. “You and me now, let’s enter the Forbidden Forest.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning, we get away from this place for a start.”

“What, just walk out?”

“Yeah, I can’t stand being watched by these lot anymore.”

It was the portraits wasn’t it. Stationed around the hall passing judgement.

“They might not be all bad,” I said. “Some of them may have had the best of motives.”

Nicky didn’t look convinced. “Mebbe, and mebbe not. They look like a set of wankers to me. Come on, Let’s go. Not out of the main door, we’ll skip around the back and out through the car park. Let’s make our own decisions.”

“And the consequences?”

Nicky stepped closer towards me. It’s not as though we lacked space in that cavernous hall. Nor were we unobserved as the portraits of founders and governors and ancient worthies continued to look down upon us: the stiff-collared be-whiskered patriarchs frowning on the underlings. Let them judge. Nicky and I were being pulled by a force which was being exerted from somewhere beyond and, as for who made the first move, I have no idea, but our tentative hug became warmer, our faces made gentle contact and then we kissed. A long and glorious kiss when the world did stop moving on and my body was charged with enough energy to bring the whole Victorian edifice crumbling down.

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When we pulled apart again, I knew that Nicky had been to the same place that I had.
The adrenalin of fright and excitement ran through me and I needed some confirmation.
“What about those consequences?”
What about them? I was looking into Nicky’s eyes and Nicky was looking straight back.

Nicky has beautiful eyes. A delicate bone structure and beautiful eyes.

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