

Cours de Ph. Romanski

Johnnie was playing the piano at the far end, with Stanley Lett and Ted beside him. He was oblivious of both. His shoulders and feet tapped and shrugged to the jazz, his rather puffy white face blank as he stared away to the mountains. Stanley did not mind that Johnnie was indifferent to him: Johnnie was his meal-ticket, his invitation to parties where Johnnie played, his passport to a good time. He made no secret of why he was with Johnnie—he was the frankest of petty crooks. In return he saw that Johnnie had plenty of ‘organised’ cigarettes, beer and girls, all for nothing. I said he was a crook, but this is nonsense of course. He was a man who had understood from the beginning that there is one law for the rich and one for the poor. This was purely theoretical knowledge for me until I actually lived in a working-class area in London. That was when I understood Stanley Lett. He had the profoundest instinctive contempt for the law; contempt, in short, for the State about which we talked so much. I suppose that was why Ted was intrigued with him? He used to say: ‘But he’s so intelligent!’—the inference being that if the intelligence were used, he could be harnessed to the cause. And I suppose Ted wasn’t so far wrong. There is a type of trade union official like Stanley: tough, controlled, efficient, unscrupulous. I never saw Stanley out of a shrewd control of himself, used as a weapon to get everything he could out of a world he took for granted was organised for the profit of others. He was frightening. He certainly frightened me, with his big hard bulk, hard clear features, and cold analytical grey eyes. And why did he tolerate the fervent and idealistic Ted? Not, I think, for what he could get out of him. He was genuinely touched that Ted, ‘a scholarship boy,’ was still concerned about his class. At the same time he thought him mad. He would say: ‘Look, mate, you’ve been lucky, got more brains than most of us. You use your chances and don’t go mucking about. The workers don’t give a muck for anyone but themselves. You know it’s true. I know it’s true.’

‘But Stan,’ Ted harangued him, his eyes flashing, his black hair in agitated motion all over his head: ‘Stan if enough of us cared for the others, we could change it all—don’t you see?’ Stanley even read the books Ted gave him, and returned them saying: ‘I’ve got nothing against it. Good luck to you, that’s all I can say.’

On this morning Stanley had stacked the top of the piano with ranks of beer mugs. In a corner was a packing case stacked with bottles. The air around the piano was thick with smoke, lit with stray gleams of reflected sunlight. The three men were isolated from the room in a haze of sun-lanced smoke. Johnnie played, played, played, quite oblivious. Stanley drank and smoked and kept an eye on the girls coming in who might do for himself or Johnnie. And Ted alternatively yearned after the political soul of Stanley and the musical soul of Johnnie. As I’ve said, Ted had taught himself music, but he could not play. He would hum snatches from Prokofiev, Mozart, Bach, his face agonised with impotent desire, forcing Johnnie to play. Johnnie played anything by ear, he played the airs as Ted hummed them, while his left hand hovered impatiently just above the keys. The moment the hypnotic pressure of Ted’s concentration relaxed, the left hand broke into syncopation, and then both hands were furious in a rage of jazz, while Ted smiled and nodded and sighed, and tried to catch Stanley’s eye in rueful amusement. But Stanley’s returning smile was for mateyness only, he had no ear at all.

These three stayed at the piano all day.

Doris Lessing, *The Golden Notebook* (1962)