

The Principle Vice

She had lived with Alvin, an Osteopath from Durham, for eight years without so much as considering what he constantly tried telling her of the interconnectedness of the human body. That was *his* world. It wasn't that she didn't agree, it was more frightened by the madness of it, she wasn't interested. It sounded airy-fairy at best when he spoke of improving relationships between joints, muscles, nerves and circulation. During their early meetups (by her mid-thirties she refused to call them dates), he would occasionally check and manipulate her bones, at times cracking an elbow or re-setting some of her fingers after holding her hand for a little while in a restaurant. But, though she had been too polite to say outright, he came to understand his procedures were unwelcome, and so stopped.

Once moved-in some months later, however, slowly he reintroduced the practice. What might begin with a soft massage would build to a snapping of her shoulder or a quick pull and re-set of her foot at the ankle. Although vaguely irritated by his entitled presumption, overall she enjoyed the results too much to mention the annoyance.

In time, as she righted herself from putting down the shopping bags or exhaled loudly after sitting or if he heard a crack from some joint of hers as she climbed the stairs, he might quickly reach out and violently twist her knee from behind, or click and clack her shoulder blades as though working a Rubik's Cube.

Pottering around the house might elicit an enquiry as to why she carried herself at an angle or how come her left leg limped. Since she rarely rewarded pain by taking note of it, usually her dismissive, distracted response would result, in time, in an ambush. Within days he would leap out, unbidden, to perform "Emergency Osteopathy", accompanied by siren-like E-O!, E-O!, E-O! noises while he crunched and prodded and snapped her into shape. Though it never felt less than great afterward (she admitted only to herself), he would have known she'd be upset, likely refusing to speak with him for days. He'd do it anyway, pleading professional frustration. Her physical autonomy was being violated by his assaults she explained. Yet time and again he would do it, then later not apologise, but promise never to do so again without permission. He declared it near impossible to "refuse to ignore the pain he could see in her body, even if she refused to acknowledge it." She could never quite determine if he was deliberately taking advantage or if she was over-reacting. Was he on a Power-trip? Was she in danger from this man? He didn't once raise his voice above hers, yet although he spoke in a perfectly audible fashion it seemed to her that he held back, as though he whispered and kept a deeper, louder tone in reserve. Likewise, though always quick to concede, the rough directness of his bearing somehow suggested a darker past. Perhaps she was being unfair? Did he truly believe he was helping with the liberties he took? Whether it helped or not, she felt he too often crossed the line.

Twice he surprised her with a quick twist of her neck, resulting in a rage she never knew she contained, having been certain in that instant she had landed centre-stage in an act of murder. For some time after these incidents—*perhaps even now, in some ways*—she remained unconvinced he hadn't merely been practicing for the day when conditions were better suited to making a quick escape. The last thing she felt she could do was ask—thereby advertising her *Fear*. *Surely he knew? Was that the real reason he did it? Did he get off on it?*

In time, he seemed to understand. *Perhaps it was just his upbringing, being the middle of three boys?* Brothers she never met. She came to appreciate his self-control sufficiently to make it a point never to inform him of any joint stiffness or pain lest he think she missed his intensive attentiveness.

Somehow she didn't fall over as she slid across the ice in the school yard one Winter. Her comical twists and turns over a five metre distance had been so hilarious and had propagated such rare and non-ironic admiration from students and teachers alike, that she was reluctant some days later to attribute her niggling pain to this intrepid feat. By the end of the week however she could barely walk from the stabbing spasms in her lower back, yet still she refused to say anything to Alvin. He later admitted he had noticed the change in her gait the very day it happened, even before she had been aware of an issue. Eventually her (only slightly) exaggerated agony frustrated him sufficiently to insist on doing something about it.

After an hour of bone-manipulation from head to toes to fingers, he performed the most frightening procedure of her life, whereby he had her curled, face-up in a ball on the table, knees bent in the air. His face in hers, he lay across her legs fingering the vertebrae beneath her as though playing a musical instrument. Her involuntary giddy laughter forced a bounce, a swelling bounce due to the proximity of his face rising higher and falling more closely to hers each time. He smiled on one up-bounce and said "Scorpio!"

Both catching their breath, he suddenly slammed downward with all his weight. A loud cracking noise like coconuts smashing off concrete was not entirely drowned out by her single scream. Immediately the pain was gone. She was delirious with relief.

Afterward he confessed he would not have performed this procedure on anyone else as by then it was no longer legal to do so in Ireland. Alarm turned to outrage before eventually settling to a cathartic resignation.

Despite ultimately coming to appreciate his forbearance, she could never bring herself to listen to him speak of his profession. She'd cringe at his claim he could relieve ailments such as asthma or period pain. Phrases like Myofascial Continuity and Morphological Complexity would have her holding her breath in panic, waving a hand in the air to interrupt him before running from the room. She had no idea if what he spoke of had any real Medical backing or Scientific proof and felt unqualified to seek answers. She was vaguely aware, or suspected, that what he did—its foundational concepts—was not sanctioned nor overseen by any certified medical body. Instinctively, she felt that Osteopathy ran contrary to her scientific mind. She had faith in her Religion and trust in Science. The level to which he had manipulated her own bones, he freely admitted, was illegal. Further discussion on the topic was too stressful to her. She didn't want to understand him any more than she did for fear she would love him less.

Over time, she knew this to be an impediment to their relationship but, though still unwilling or unable to truly accept his profession, she liked having him around. He didn't force himself or his quirks, preferences or predilections on her. This, she felt, was a necessity in what she considered "older" relationships. Here she meant a relationship between people who didn't meet in a more formative flush of youth. She felt too old by the time they had met (now she'd smile at the thought of it) to be prodded and reshaped, mentally or in any other manner.

They might have married, except for his "complicated" marital status. She didn't ask for details. She also secretly suspected he had fled the UK for some reason, the most likely

being that a patient had been harmed in one of his manipulations. But again she didn't ask. They communicated and had conversations much like any couple, she was sure, yet she was too frightened to enquire why he had said Scorpio. Not knowing caused her to imagine all sorts of horrors in his English history, but nonetheless she persevered in her obstinacy, rhetorically asking herself why it should matter to them as a couple that they know everything about each other?

They saw no need to marry, except it would at that time perhaps have still been viewed negatively at her workplace to be seen to be "living in sin." If people knew. If parents know.

People did know—even some parents knew—more than she knew they knew. But nobody cared to mention it, apart that is from an opportunistic derisive snort from Mr. Burnhill now and then, or a raised eyebrow and silent smirk whenever a public conversation provided a gap that would otherwise allow him to "insert smutty inuendo here." *Child of an immature, stunted culture.*

It was only after Alvin died suddenly in a crash (ten years next April) and she began, still in her forties, to feel herself dissolve and dissipate from the Specific to the Vague that she considered how, not only our bodies, but our *selves* are all connected. How a butterfly causes an Earthquake, as her mind wandered and found itself not less capable, to her way of thinking, but less willing to be tied to one particular thing. It floated and understood, more than comprehended. This, she found was why she had to give up teaching. She had intended to drop it all. Let the universe make of her what it will, swallow her whole as it pulled her evermore into the abyss. Until, that is, Mr. Carroll mentioned he would shortly be looking for a Vice Principal due to expanding numbers at the school, asking if she'd be interested.

Her strength, she knew—*she knew she knew she knew!*—lay in the *doing*. Not in the describing. What mattered the describing? Of course, *describing matters* lay at the heart of Education, but by now, *describing* things—even *comprehending* them—was secondary to the *Doing*. She wanted students not to Learn, but *to Be!* Whenever she had tried to explain this notion, there were no words that didn't illicit scorned laughter in others. Whenever she tried to understand it for herself (which usually came only after failing to describe it aloud), she felt it flit beyond her grasp, beyond her vision, ultimately, until she could barely fathom what it was she had been thinking of—this Willo-the-wisp border between Describing and Explaining. Between Doing and Being. Between Comprehending and Understanding. *Are Comprehending and Understanding the same thing?* Not at all as far as she was concerned. It's like the space between thinking and saying. Something is lost in the translation of the *Action* of the Thought when putting it into words.

Paul Carroll knew this, she was certain. He was the one person who knew it. Only he now understood she wasn't just some scatty, aimless, loveless, lifeless, dreary old "spinster." *What a terrible word, Spinster. Overflowing with misogynistic negatives in just two syllables.* Paul had understood as they lay, post-coital, on the hotel bed, a number of years before she met Alvin. It went beyond words. No words were needed. With Paul she shared an understanding of the World. Unspoken connections. *Meanings* that required no language. It wasn't even about sex nor because of it. Well, maybe it was because of it. Something beyond the physical happens in that physical union. There is Understanding. There is fulfilment of unconsidered needs. Beyond Love or Lust or Vanity. Within the physical act itself. Somewhere at the very heart of it, there lies an Understanding without thought or action or language. There is an ethereal, intangible melding of self with another. And with the universe itself. It is a fulfilment of our

reason to be, beyond Reason. We comprehend without knowing. Without needing to know. Perhaps women have longer to consider such wisdom that men experience only in an instant?

Alvin didn't connect in this same way somehow. His mind spoke a different language. His language, a different key. For Alvin, connections began and ended within the body, it seemed. People could share and get along and love, to Alvin's way of thinking, but we are all separate islands nonetheless, waving across the water. Then again, at times she would find herself wondering if that was how he had really felt. *Perhaps it was me?*

She had loved him, of course, Alvin. But that unstated Understanding never existed between them. They were more like cushions than porridge.

It only happened the once. With Paul, that is. He was the newly-appointed Principal. She was a teacher, new to St. Edmonds. After they returned from the Teachers' Union conference that time, they had a few weeks of awkwardness before settling to a near-comfortable working relationship. Within a year it was as though nothing had happened. They hadn't spoken about it. There was no need. She had known he loved his wife, Maureen. And kids. She had no wish to drag him from that. She cringed in fact over the years if ever she thought of that evening. She blamed herself entirely. In a reflective mood, if the memory snuck up on her like a phantom looming at a blown window, she knew she'd have despised him if he'd left his family, as she would have despised herself. But at the heart of this notion was nothing but a derisive scoff. There was never a suggestion it was anything other than what it was. In fact there never *was* any reason that could be formed in words for their "foolish evening", as she had come to think of it. Thankfully they managed to not put themselves in such a situation again, despite working together for over twenty five years. Not for fear of succumbing to passion (at which by now he, as much as she, would no doubt laugh), but for fear of discovering some misinterpretation. It was better to understand that each understood and agreed. Any dialogue on the matter could only prove a negative.

The act itself had long-since been negated by both, she was certain. When passing in the corridor or if they found each other squeezing through a doorway at the same time, alone or in company there was nothing considered, expected, remembered nor hinted at, even by way of a tightening of the eyes if accidentally they locked magnetlike in a public space.

After Maureen had died and she hugged him for the first time since, only heartfelt sympathy was exchanged. Even with Alvin's passing the following year, and with it any obstacle or person or ulterior reason why she and Paul might not, in time, explore the possibility of *companionship* if nothing else, there was no suggestion of it. By now, neither was the same person who fucked one night in a thoughtless, mindless, selfishly immature manner all those years before, giddy only with the excited possibility of it. If both shared the unknown need then, by now both understood, without trying to comprehend, the need for it never to have happened.