

The Gong

By Paul O’Kane

In-transit, I called her, from a spotless phone in a state-of-the-art airport. Forcing enthusiasm into a travel-weary voice I arranged to meet in just two more hours. After a short connecting flight an escalator led me down into a cavernous arrivals lounge where a booth was arbitrarily sited amid the acres of steel and stone to accommodate smokers in a transparent ‘sin bin’. As I was ejected at ground level I noticed her distant figure rushing to greet me, though her expression revealed that this was not through any sense of occasion but purely because she’d mistimed her short trip across the city.

She looked smart, as ever, in pale clothes that seemed chosen to complement the creamy airport décor. She was petite, quietly ambitious and attractive in the way that she intelligently asserted a difference while grooming herself to complying with current standards of beauty. Her trim neatness made me more conscious of my own crumpled state, dishevelled as I was by the long-haul economy flight. When we embraced we unexpectedly knocked both cheekbones and temples. And face-to-face, eyes avoiding meaningful contact, I began to feel a peculiar tiredness, a sense of draining fatigue.

This odd discomfort established itself on the train into the city, making our conversation uninspired until, at a busy interchange, by some odd fold of fate, her parents boarded the same carriage. They were returning from a ceremony where her father’s achievements had been celebrated and we all hastily expressed amazed greetings before the seniors rushed off to catch a further connection. This event later gleamed in my conscience as

an opportunity missed, appearing to my insecure mind as a test failed. How should I have responded there and then, and what truths are revealed by the way we behave when given no time to prepare?

Cool control on her part wrong-footed my instincts leaving me unsure when or whether to advance or when to fall in step with her more efficient behaviour. Things had seemed okay while we were separated by thousands of miles, but up-close and up-front some clash of interpretation kept us out of sync. Was it the closed distance that had changed everything, or the fact we were now on *her* native soil? As the trip rolled-on I tried in vain to re-establish the romantic link was forced to recall it as something merely nostalgic, tantalisingly close yet wholly inaccessible.

Given time to pass alone as a result of her dutifully maintained routine I tried to regain her affection with gestures and gifts. Taking pride in my knowledge of flowers I visited a local shop, but here my expertise deserted me. The flowers favoured locally seemed too dull or subtle to me and so, with resignation I chose a daisy-like bloom barely supported by a gangly stem. It looked like a flower drawn by a child but was the closest to what I considered sweet or pretty. I decided to surprise her with it at the office.

The university building was almost deserted for vacation and I followed empty corridors past closed doors with indecipherable names until I found her working alone at a computer. Acknowledging my presence with mild shock she accepted the flower with polite gratitude and set it down immediately on a desk. Soon I was saying goodbye,

looking not at her but at the weedy flower which, placed as it was just beyond reach of the dim light falling through the room's only window, seemed even less of a good choice now.

Preparing food one evening in her cramped campus apartment I noticed she couldn't reach the high shelves where some of her most useful pots and pans were stored. This gave me the noble notion of buying a more practical gift to break the ice between us and I headed for town next morning, again intending to surprise.

Passing through campus fields some strange sounds led me to discover students hanging-out on the music department's low roof - drinking coffee, smoking, and tuning-up in the rapidly warming sun. Walking on I became intrigued by a chorus of grunts and stomps and peered through the half-shuttered window of a gym where youths in costumes and masks were being instructed to attack each other with wooden swords. One of them rushed up to face me through the glass and, scowling through his barred mask, let out a territorial cry.

Boarding the bus I became confused as to which doors were entrance and exit, where tickets were bought or presented and eventually settled safely behind the driver hoping to receive guidance about when to get off. From here I admired the operation of gears, brakes and steering all carried out with an air of civic responsibility by the driver's white-gloved hands. Once I'd located the town's department store I used a combination of phrase-book and mime to locate the folding steps I'd decided to buy her. This

attracted a small crowd of assistants whose conflicting advice transported me rapidly from floor to floor, and when I finally found what I wanted I held the steps aloft in a sign of satisfaction that provoked a brief round of applause.

She accepted this gift too with no more than vague bewilderment and again I watched her set-aside my offering, doubting it would ever be used. Deciding to abandon these generous gestures and use time more selfishly, the following day I wandered, allowing my feet to find roads and paths that softly narrowed and gently rose until I found myself ascending one of the low mountains that guarded the small town. Nearing the summit and beginning to enjoy a sense of adventurous independence I turned, sat, and took-in the view. For a while all was quiet and still. A tiny lizard flickered by my sandaled feet and the town below offered little evidence of the many lives being lived there. Then, as if arranged precisely for me, a magnificent gong sounded in the mountains, its deep and warm vibration grew softly, steadily, inexorably, like a part of nature and yet assuring my surroundings that men were nearby engaged in acts of faith.

At the sound of the gong something profound rocked within me and it seemed as if *this* and only this mysterious rendezvous had been the real purpose of my journey. Led here by a confusion of romance, responsibility and desire, all this now seemed to have drawn me on to this experience of the gong, in who's singular, ancient, softly grandiose sound I felt I heard all I had ever dreamed this land might offer.

The gong wasn't loud but it seemed to surround the mountains and form a filter through which the valleys could be seen anew. It glowed within me, merging self with world and confirming that this land was not guided by the bitter sophistications I negotiated so clumsily at home but was founded on different myths entirely. The majestic gong opened out my consciousness like a flowering sun and I suddenly understood the reason why the love I had experienced with this girl had felt free of all guilt, why the love of someone from another world may have cleansed and renewed me instead of leaving me perplexed and compromised—as did the girls from my own land. And as these thoughts coalesced I realised, with slight discomfort, that they implied women and their lands might be somehow continuous, synonymous, intrinsically or inseparably related.

The sound reached its crescendo and dissipated into the clear sky. I found myself alone with a frustrating sense of fatigue returning and dragging with it the veil that had intermittently clouded my trip and confused my intentions. Timing, I thought, was all. Whatever proud spirit I had tried to nurture in myself it now seemed misaligned and ungainly, out-of-step with events that my anxiety had conjured into existence. Timing was all and I had badly mistimed this visit demonstrating only a lack of faith in our partnership, a lack of faith in love, a lack of faith in the future.

With a crushing sense of abandonment I accepted that my entire visit amounted to little more than the worthless consequence of a fumbled proposal. As the mountain air, still tinted with the memory of the gong, passed into and through me, I felt it peer inside, into every motive, and conclude that, though all I had felt for this girl had been honest, noble

and necessary her land had called me here only to call me to account. It had confronted me with an ultimatum and found my response lacking. What was demanded of me was a mature decision, a decision that in itself would have constituted my maturity.

Soon after my experience on the mountain she drove me, in a tiny hired car, to an area renowned for its semi-active volcano. When we reached the summit only a few tourists were there, hanging around, vaguely associated with a coach and driver waiting in the parking area. She left me in the car, walked purposefully to the crater rim, and, taking no interest in any visual spectacle appeared to consult the volcano as if it were an oracle before returning to the vehicle and immediately driving us homeward. As we curled down the road back to town, gaudy little 'Love Hotels' occasionally slid by the car's windows, but each went tactfully unacknowledged, as did the volcano's sulphurous smell, lingering in the claustrophobic interior.

Our airport farewell was a theatre of ineptly enacted emotions, concluding in a last, poorly postured embrace. When I returned to my home country my family were warm and welcoming, but through the jaundiced filter of my ignominious mood they seemed like jailers escorting me back to reality after a bungled escape attempt. Here, the land also spoke to me, but in a harsh, over-familiar tongue. Leafless trees framed its flat fields and seemed to gesticulate rudely against the tepid sky. To anyone who enquired I pretended the trip had been OK but my lack of stories, photographs and enthusiasm probably betrayed that all had not gone well. No obvious catastrophe had occurred, it was true, but some lack of action on my part, some restraint or reticence of her own, had

conspired to douse the embers of their long-distance partnership. Far from satisfying expectations, the trip had extinguished my flame of belief in that distant land, and even in distance itself, exposing as a mere mirage the very idea of another place where love and life are more likely, more encouraged, to succeed.

Like a man recovering from an operation to have his possibilities removed I plodded dutifully through working days. I continued to be conscientious but lacked the spark that once enlivened those around me. My air of melancholy pointed to an all-too visible gap in my love life, leading me into foolish fixations and flirtatious follies. Unable to conceal my disappointment I even became a figure of fun, losing the respect I'd enjoyed while hopes of her and of there still burned within me. Dismal deliberations invariably led back to my trip, which now appeared to be the source of all my troubles. I went over its events repeatedly, neurotically trying to pinpoint just what it was that I had or had not done to call down upon myself the wrathful force that now steered me towards the dingy backwaters of a once promising life.

Yes, we visited the great city of temples, and at the most appropriate time of year, but the experience was compromised by my fatigue-flattened vision. I recalled the ancient architecture and blossom-laden trees but all overwritten by one taunting slogan - 'LIVE YOUR DREAM'- stamped across a T-shirt worn by our guide. Was it really possible to choose that option or was that precisely what I had failed to do when, unlike many less fortunate than myself I had been given a chance to 'live my dream'? The land that had

beckoned me so long –through paintings, poetry, films and photographs, seemed to have taught me that dreams only wither once we exert our right to make them real.

Yes, a friend with connections had booked us into an expensive hotel in a grand quarter of the imperial city, but no pleasure could be derived from its *en-suite* luxury, just feelings of incongruity as the sumptuous furnishings and crisply-ironed linen made me feel unworthy, intimidated, misplaced.

Yes, we travelled to her home province, and by a potentially charming route, but the wandering local trains had felt furtive, as if trying to avoid something, and the ferry that cruised through archipelagos of dragon's teeth rocks was boarded by a group of pensioners who responded gruffly to the overcast weather and loudly proclaimed the cruel injustices of old age.

Yes, I visited her family, but only thanks to a certain honourable hospitality code brandished by her father as superior to his more instinctive reluctance to welcome this half-hearted suitor. And so, throughout a carefully presented meal, earnest stabs at male conversation each terminated in hollow laughter followed by silent gazing at the assembled dishes.

And yes, her mother had toured us around local beauty spots. Nationally renowned orchards and fields of abundant produce were presented to me like those prizes on a game-show that the contestant has already turned down to make a further gamble. I

tasted new flavours of ice cream at a booth with an excellent view and, most memorable of all, we had parked the car and walked, like three enlightened ones, down the steeply winding path of a resplendent Rhododendron valley to the dark pool of a sparkling waterfall where shafts of sunlight tinted by translucent blossoms overhead inspired little rainbows to dance in the aqueous air around the head of a recumbent, moss-stained Buddha. Perhaps it was there and then that destiny, barely communicating in whispered codes, had offered me a final opportunity to take the way leading to fulfilment of life's taunting promise. But in the deep heart of that beautiful vale, like a man who has fallen out of love with the sea, I found myself inexplicably deserted by all the heart-swelling emotions I knew I *should* have felt, and I disappointed my generous hosts with inappropriate comments which crawled from my lips like malevolent spirits over which I had no control. And so there was also the walk back for me to recall, when I had trudged upwards with the weariness of a man resigned to a difficult future, leaving behind what might have been one last time and place, one last chance which, if taken, could have eased my way forever.

Despite my avid pursuit of past events I found neither peace nor solution. There was no singular event (apart, perhaps from that initial greeting at the airport, or that coincidental encounter in the train carriage) that might have rescued everything. I gained little from these earnest reflections other than the tragicomic wisdom of any second-rate clown that 'timing is all'. And yet I sensed -with damning irony- that I had learned this lesson long ago and still been unable to put it to use when the opportunity arose.

Avoiding conversation and company I lapsed into my old loner's habit of urban roaming. Attempting to outpace my busy mind I passed daily through the very heart of the city where the famous clock-tower was invariably surrounded by tourists persecuting it with tiny, flashing cameras, as though a great beast had been miraculously captured and put on display. For me the clock-tower signified only the oppressive familiarity of local time, as its two-toned chime linked the weight of 'HERE' to the force of 'NOW', like a ball and chain imposed on all who failed to grasp opportunity and thus turn time to their advantage.

Whenever I passed the clock-tower I would recall the day before my ill-fated flight, when I had marched about these streets more energetically than usual, like a nervous animal marking its ground, until the lateness of the afternoon reminded me to call my boss. An impotent bleat from my under-charged mobile phone had driven me into the clammy confines of a public phone box, whose interior smelled sour and which was plastered with sex-worker's cards. I recalled that as I arranged my body in the tight space I had been unable to restrain myself from glancing around, wondering whether the exotic oriental faces paraded there bore any resemblance to the real people waiting in seedy spaces beyond the big black phone numbers printed beneath. Those faces, fashions and forms were surely as unlikely as the extravagant names excited by italic type and blaring out against vivid background colours.

My boss had answered the phone and our voices slipped into the subtly hierarchical register that enables our mutually beneficial relationship. Though averting my gaze, the

cards had beaten down on me like dangerous rays against which I had no defence while I discussed problems that might arise during my pending absence. After a few minutes I had shouldered the heavy door and stepped out feeling relieved and proud to be shaping my own life and taking fate into my own hands. The brief discussion had confirmed something about which I had perhaps not fully convinced myself. I really was going to make an unprecedented and uncharacteristically adventurous trip, to see her on the other side of the world.

But walking home that evening I had arrived at the clock-tower just as the sun, setting in the West, turned it to a looming silhouette, and staring up out of the shadows into its dimly illuminated face I'd sensed some implacable, paternal force smirking down which seemed to insist that *this* was my home after all, whether I liked the fact or not, and that my pending adventure was bound to failure, simply because I would and must return to *this* land and to my dutiful role within it, despite all delusory dreams of escape, improvement, or rebirth elsewhere.

Though I fought off this baleful influence, and had nevertheless taken my trip, I have to admit that I returned to endure nothing but disillusion, disorientation and regret. And that is why lately I hear the clock-tower's famous bell sound over this city like a curfew, reining-in the souls of the multitude and sonorously curtailing every citizen's heartfelt dreams of liberty. 'HERE NOW', 'HERE NOW', it bellows out its haunting repetition, and the only refuge I can find is in recapturing that moment on the far away mountain

when the gong welled up softly from silence, as if out of the womb of the world, its source never identified.