

QUEER'S PROGRESS

A Novel

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ISBN 978-1-62646-647-0

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In somewhat different form, this book appeared online 1999-2003.

Booklocker.com, Inc.
First Edition 2013

for my mother and father

SHE HAD WATCHED LIFE, since she came to London, with a sort of despair—motivated and busy, always, always progressing; even people pausing on bridges seemed to pause with a purpose; no bird seemed to pursue a quite aimless flight. The spring of the works seemed unfound only by her....

Elizabeth Bowen,
The Death of the Heart

1.

My family is fucked up beyond the norm, OK? That's why I work like a maniac, to keep out of the house. Not that it helps, when everyone I meet is so fucked up.

But even when I try to stay busy, things can slow up around me, trap me in syrup. Monday, nothing's going on, except the sun's pouring down hot honey, making people shift in their seats. Stays over the roof till afternoon, but once it starts rolling for Jersey, even in wintertime they have to get out from under, move to the shade wedged beneath the high west windows. *Flee.*

So I'm standing in the reading room cage thinking, *What now? What next?* This is 1991, week after we start bombing Iraq. That first night opens the door to a new world! They close the exits, and just to get *out* of the 42nd Street Library everyone—even *us*—has to go through the front, no explanation, descend the marble staircases beneath the giant arches with the sinking sensation of *What'd I do?* In the Great Hall guards want to see every scrap of paper. But it's *war*. *Cool*, actually.

"You OK, Eddie?" goes Akesha.

"Fine," I snap. Poor Akesha. But she knows I have my moods.

The dumbwaiter chucks into place and I take out a load of books, punch in the numbers, spread them along the counter. Usually that causes a stir, people race up to get theirs. But no one moves. Which means sun is washing out the lightboard.

"Eddie?" says Akesha.

"*What?*"

She goes off to tell her troubles to one of the girls. People are fidgeting like ants under a magnifying glass. Nothing to do except watch. But it amuses me. These are people who choose a chair in the morning like they're moving in for good—size up the neighbors, lay out their pads and pens (counting every one), pull the next chair closer and drape their coat over it. *Oy!*

Then through Genealogy's shiny bronze doors steps a shaggy-headed *angel*. Gilded by sun, blue eyes snapping with thought, he walks through the room, straight at *me*. Glances at the board, shows his number card and says, "Four-thirty-four, please," which is part of the load that's just come up.

"Hi!" I go. Don't know why. Startles a flash behind his specs. Cutest geek I ever saw. Now I recognize him, he's a regular. What have I been missing?

"Hello," he says, wary.

"So what're you working on, anyway?" I ask, shoving over a pile of musty shit. "You always get the oldest stuff."

"On Walter Terse?" he says. "Annotating his diaries?"

"Yeah?" I say enthusiastically, thinking Walter *who*? Which does not get past him.

"The 'Voluble Victorian'? English novelist-slash-essayist?"

"Cool!" I go. His eyes are like jewels.

"Well, he mentions a lot of people and things that don't mean too much any more, so it's my job to try and figure them out so my boss can write footnotes."

"Wow!"

"Thank you," he says, and away he goes. Flip his number off.

A line's forming. Sun goes off the board, people converge. "On break," I yell down to Alan.

"Eduardo, you can't just — Eduardo, come back here!"

Out of the cage, past the lascivious stare of the librarian on duty (what law is it says librarians have to be gay?), down the blazing shelves to the *Dictionary of National Biography*. Three fucking pages on "Walter Ivanhoe Terse (1827-1907), prolific novelist and social reformer fondly remembered as the *Voluble Victorian*." Very interesting.

Back to the cage. The line now epic in length. Snakes past the Bibles, where the regulars hunched over Old Testaments figuring out their lottery numbers curse the ones on line. Start working through the backlog. The girls never keep up, and Alan's hopeless. When things get busy he rises up from his lair to get in our way, though his tie and important expression reassure the ones waiting.

"Did you hear me, Eduardo?"

"I'm back, Alan. Don't get your bowels in an uproar."

Old line. Still works.

"Downstairs," he says. "Now."

OK, down the steep flight to the dark dusty corner where rotting books hide his desk. Mildew's unbelievable.

"Sit down," he says.

"Can't, I'll get asthma."

"Eddie, your shift has *two* breaks, and they're scheduled for —"

Yeah, yeah, we work it out. Boss has to show he's boss. No problem. Stand and wheeze a little, flip him my Goya urchin look, and he rushes through it. No one gets books to the people faster than I do. Creases in his forehead underline his words: "—'cause I don't want to lose you, I know it's only part-time and doesn't pay much, but it's not so bad, really. I mean, *is it?*"

"I like it," I say. "Sorry, Alan, won't happen again." And back upstairs we go.

Later I'm giving a woman one of her books, telling her when the other two arrive we'll light up her number again, give us a few, when I see the Terse guy heading for the return window. Go over to take personal delivery. Actually, I know his name from the call slips: Andrew Thomas. Two first names. Waspy enough, I don't think?

"Thanks," he says, sliding books beneath the bars.

"Find it?" I ask.

"No," he says. Smiles. "That is —"

"Every little bit helps?"

"It adds up."

"Would you agree *The League of Optimists* is Terse's best?"

Smile goes wide for a second. Good teeth. Hirsute, too, with that red beard. But the eyes go panicky, and *I* feel it, too: Something grabbing my *crotch*? The *fuck*?

He stumbles toward the catalog room, and someone gooses me, really digs into my ass. "Hey, big boy, Alan says—"

It's Akesha. Downstairs where we hang out there's a Polaroid on the wall, seven of us jamming faces together. Five are girls, and one day I realize I fucked every one of them. It's embarrassing.

"Oh Akesha, let's go somewhere."

"There's that place," she says. "In the stacks."

"Eduardo!" calls Alan. Nods at the line.

Back to the salt mines.

2.

"Ned Hamet, his three o'clock?"

"He'll be right with you, Mr. Hamet."

Dr. Kushner's top dermatologist in the city. Have to admire him, rolling up the big bucks healing people. Did I miss my calling?

When my turn (finally) came and his nurse put me in the examining room, I waited beside the window. Examining rooms make me nervous. Autopsy rooms with padding. I preferred looking outdoors to sitting on the jointed slab and staring at the instruments of torture ranged along the walls. Instead I watched ants negotiating the slush on the street, then glanced across at the other wing. Amazing what they'll do in a hospital with the windows wide open. Sickmaking.

Dr. Kushner bustled in. "How are you, Ned?" he said. He shook my hand, then washed his, meaning no insult.

"Hello, Doc," I said. "Oh, the usual: Two moles on my back. Plus this thing on my nose."

"Have a seat, lie back."

He meant on the slab. Cranked it flat, pulled the light down, and went out of focus as he came in close on my nose. A negligible little growth, a freckle or mole like those that turn up on my back as regularly as rocks in spring plowing, all because when I was young no one knew to keep out of the sun. Hardly visible, but they drive me crazy. I know the procedure: Freeze them with that super-thin needle, then sluice them off with laser beams or whatever, slap on a Band-Aid, wish me good day, and leave it to the receptionist to charge me the outrageous fee ten minutes of the good doctor's time goes for.

Being examined by a doctor is a special kind of ecstasy. Like conversing with God, or being adored by a lover. I'm a hypochondriac, no denying that, but at least I don't indulge in private hysteria. No, I make regular rounds of the leading

specialists, and I do what they tell me, too: My drinking is strictly medicinal, I shake my booty to music half an hour daily, and a rabbit would envy my diet (but I *insist* on regularity: A good bowel movement in the morning takes a load off my mind).

"*Hmm,*" Dr. Kushner said pleasantly. This was a new note. Usually he was reassuringly brusque. "Take off your shirt and lie on your tummy, do your back first."

He rendered my back again flawless, but all I could think of—*roaring* in my ears—was the word I cannot say. I can say heart attack—my heart's never given me a moment's concern. I can say AIDS, which I intend never to get. But one word I *cannot* bring myself to utter.

Dr. Kushner had no such compunction. Turned me over and loomed again. "Looks like a skin cancer, Ned," he said. "Let's take it off, send it for biopsy."

"Can—?"

I could go no further. One *horrifying* thought: *Die with my novel unpublished?*

"Probably just basal cell, though it could be squamous cell or malignant mela— Hold *still*. Even if it is a bad one, this should take care of it, unless it's already metasta— Hold *still*, dammit!"

Is this what it comes to, the jolly sentence of death twenty stories over First Avenue?

"Ned, you're in your sixties, you have to expect—"

The worst day of my life darkened. "Beg pardon, Doc, I don't turn sixty for *months* yet."

"Whatever." *Whatever!* "Hey, this is nothing. Had a patient yesterday, nice young guy, active acne into his thirties?"

"Don't think I'd like him," I said.

"He's out of here by four-thirty, walks down to 14th Street, gets stabbed."

"Oh my God!"

"I mean, it's New York: Jeep comes down the sidewalk, get out of the way, right? But this poor schmuck slaps it as it goes past. Who knows why? Reminding the driver of his manners? Guy gets out with a knife. I mean?"

"Did he die?"

"Course he died," said Dr. Kushner. "What kind of story is it if he didn't die? Point is, one tiny skin cancer. Get

another, we'll take *it* off, too. And we haven't even biopsied it yet, for God's sake."

Doctors are too close to death to know what it means. Off he sent me into the world with a Band-Aid across my nose. I felt grotesque. Leprous. Doomed. And on the 23rd Street cross-town bus came the first stab of what I knew was pancreatic cancer, the invariably fatal kind. And with church that evening!

I was going to ask the young man next to me to hold me, just *hold* me, but he bounced off the bus at Broadway.

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