

Talk About the Life in Massachusetts

for James Draper

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Adam O’Riordan was appointed writer in residence at The Midland Hotel in spring 2013 and was co-commissioned by The Midland and Manchester Literature Festival to write a short story set in the hotel. The resulting story, *Talk About the Life in Massachusetts*, was performed at a special Afternoon Tea event as part of Manchester Literature Festival in The Midland’s Wyvern Room on Wednesday 9th October 2013.

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Talk About the Life in Massachusetts

for James Draper

He would be here soon. She had chosen the hotel. It was across the road from the conference centre. It was raining and her umbrella lay half open beside her chair. Violet and pink hearts slanted on the cheap synthetic fabric. It had been an afterthought, picked up as she left her office at the university. It embarrassed her and she wished now she hadn't brought it. She looked down into her coffee cup, at the points of light warping on the surface. She turned in her chair and peered into the octagonal atrium. A few feet away, on separate tables, two couples were lunching. Both men wore grey suits. The women clumsily, chemically tanned: the large blond nutmeg, the brunette a wet rust. Above them, high in the air, hung the lamp: a huge metal cocoon; distressed and filigreed, intricately crafted. She sat looking up at the lamp for some time. Wondering about its provenance and manufacture. Wondering if the chain that seemed to secure it to the wall really did or if there was some hidden fixing, some mechanism making sure all those pounds of finely worked metal did not come crashing down on the diners below. It made her think of Morocco. And of course to think of Morocco meant to think of him. The skeins of smoke above the souk, that intensely sweet tea, the filthy butchers' blocks, the diesel stink of the coach they took out to Essaouira.

She had considered the pub nearby as a meeting place. She would go there sometimes after concerts. You could see members of the orchestra, still in black tie, huddled around Hidersine cases that held a double bass or a viola or a cello, crammed along the tiled corridor or in the comfortable fug of the warm rooms. But somehow she couldn't picture him in there or rather she felt he might lose something in that setting.

The hotel would be better: bigger, more impersonal; a backdrop on to which they both could project themselves. The pub, she thought, suggested closeness, a residual intimacy; it created the air of an assignation. The hotel allowed for an unforced formality. She smelled chlorine and wondered if there was a pool somewhere in the hotel. She would like to swim now. Sometimes at lunch she would go to the pool they had built for the commonwealth games: the water always a degree or two too cold, the languid, handsome Turks standing talking at its edges, gossiping, horsing around, then suddenly solemn, bored-looking, concubinal, glancing over as she passed.

He would be here soon. Outside it was raining. She saw the doorman in his top hat step inside, then a gangly Slavic boy pushing a shining gold luggage trolley in his direction. She heard music from the function room adjoining the octagonal bar. They were sound checking a karaoke machine. It was a song she half knew: 'Talk about the light in Massachusetts' or was it 'talk about the life'? She tried to remember which. 'Ersatz Americana' he would have called it. It was a phrase he used, applying it to anything that did not fit his own view of his homeland. It had stuck with her. Become lodged. She loved the sound of the words when he used them, his large athlete's frame, honed and ridged from hours on the river, the brutally early mornings when he would slip from the bed, the sprawling bass of his voice tuned to the exactness of the phrase. Echoing in his chest cavity as he intoned it: 'Ersatz Americana'. He had talked to her about his childhood upstate in Mamaroneck. She remembered that too: Mamaroneck and something withering, something scornful, in the set of his mouth when he said it.

In the café in Essaouira she had watched him devouring the plate of sea-food. It was late when they arrived and the café was the only place still open. The tips of his

fingers greasy, the smashed fragments of shell around his plate like pieces of a fresco turned up in the mud. The nubs of white flesh. She had wanted to take his fingers in her mouth at the table. It had aroused her, the way he snapped and twisted the shell from the flesh. Thrilling: that mixture of hunger and greed; that play at sophistication. An hour later he was sick and shivering, the awful sweetish reek from the en suite bathroom, the sound of him throwing up, his body convulsing as he braced himself against the sink.

The email had surprised her. Seeing his forename - extended beyond the diminutive by which she had known him - and surname together: the two parts divided by a black dot. It was enough to summon him, the unresolved contours of his face wavering somewhere in her mind for a moment, an echoing sense of his physicality, a palpable quickening that caught her off guard. That she sought to suppress. Silly, she thought. Girlishly inane. The email detailed the conference he was attending. There was a breeziness to it, as if their last conversation was only days ago. As if they had never lost touch. As if they had always been in touch. She read it over then deleted the email. But when she returned from a departmental meeting later that afternoon she had retrieved it. She hadn't recognized the name of the company and so googled it but found nothing but a holding page and some generic copy about 'Business Solutions' and the 'Tech Industry'. She had been embarrassed when her student arrived early and had tried to turn the screen away from him. She felt a loss of face, some queering of the dynamic. She had criticized his essay on the Counter Reformation harshly, pronouncing it 'peppered with misconceptions', 'trite' and finally 'erring toward the third rate'. The young man crossing and re-crossing his legs in the low chair opposite her desk, a sickle shaped patch of eczema on his cheek growing fiercely red as she delivered her verdict on his work.

She wondered if her generation, - whatever that meant, whoever they were -might be one of the last for whom this kind of reunion held any charge. The last for whom there might even be such a thing as a reunion. That social media now meant the past was left yawning open, a vast crevasse that could be fallen back into at any time. Years ago, after she had taken the job in the city, she had come across a link to a site called Friends Reunited. After registering under an invented name and providing the fewest details possible, she had snooped around for a while, the initial thrill at seeing names she remembered from high school and university paling quickly in the dull sump of their lives. The dead weight of all that shared detail. Cheaply offered, brashly declared clichés and platitudes. Their total failure to circumvent the futures she could have predicted for all of them. The most daring among them seemed to have made it to Australia: Canberra, Perth, Adelaide, sunlight attending on stubbornly grey lives. She had deleted the account the same afternoon.

She fussed at her cuff for a moment and then checked her watch. He would be here soon. She studied a tall man in a mackerel-coloured raincoat, wondering if it could be him. The thatch of his auburn hair was thinning at the crown. A woman came from across the foyer and he kissed her, three times, left cheek, right cheek, left cheek again then they exited together. He smiled at her as he passed the table, glancing down. He smelled pungent: the cedar and pine and bergamot of expensive cologne. She rolled her mouth into a half-suppressed smile as he passed. The lipstick was greasy and sticky on her lips. It made her overly aware of the smallest movements of her mouth. As if she had eaten something, something rich and exotic, a fruit with a difficult name. A rambutan or that one that smelt of rotting flesh perhaps. She could taste the lipstick on her tongue. A warmth and faint numbness radiating around her

mouth and teeth when she breathed in. The taste of the pigment and whale fat. She had reapplied it twice already.

What would he ask her? What would she tell him? Would he reach into his wallet for a folded photograph of his children? Did people still do that? More likely, she supposed, he would slip an iPad from its neoprene sleeve or its embossed leather case (which of these two types of men would he have become she wondered?) and swipe through picture after picture. Vacations, weddings, an entire life portably archived. Blurry five-second video clips of his children on a Hebridean beach; a barking springer spaniel shaking white sand from its coat. This was guess work, of course, intuitive reasoning she might call it for her students. She had searched for his profile online but there was no trace of him, he had become one of those rare birds un beholden to the web. Just the name of the company and its holding page. So little to go on she had constructed his family herself; his wife, still pretty perhaps but thickening at her hips, their son and two daughters; an elegant home in the suburbs of an unfashionable English city. She knew this was fantasy but somehow wanted it to be true. She wondered how her own life would look when viewed through his eyes? When she locked the bathroom door last night it felt like a betrayal. She registered this at the time: sliding the lightweight bolt across, threading the brass hook through the eye above. They never locked the bathroom door. It wasn't what they did. Not once in the seven years they had lived together. She lay there in the bathtub soaking, the icy ribbon of a draft coming through the gap in the window. There was only enough hot water left for half a bath. She lay there semi-submerged; nipples and knees and belly button all above the water line. The smells of cooking, burned cumin, onions, drifting up from downstairs. The sound of the television, muffled voices, bursts of gunfire. Ana on the phone to her brother in Taipei. The faux wicker basket

of tampons on the floor beside the pale column of the basin. Before coming to the hotel she had changed in the disabled toilets on the fourth floor, the ones with the three quarter length mirror. Into a new suit that had been delivered to her office. She used the back stairs to exit the faculty and so avoid anyone from the department.

He would be here soon. She wondered how much she had forgotten about him.

Whether it was possible to quantify it. That lost repository, that vast cache of smell and sensation and touch; of gesture and fact. He had been writing a paper on the Christian Quarter in Damascus. He must have given up his research not long after they returned from Morocco. She tried to remember why they had separated; to recall the chain of events. How things had broken down. But detail was inexact, she couldn't remember why or when or where or even how. Just an image of a train platform somewhere in the east of England: Norfolk? Norwich? And a huge sky with too many colours in it. One of those miracle-strewn skies when what the moment needed was rain.

The bronzed women and their grey suited men had gone now. There were large tips in cash on both tables. She thought of him sick again in that room in Essouria. How by the end he lay slumped on the floor by the toilet too weak to move. Lurching toward the bowl then collapsing back. How he tried to cool his brow pressing it up against the porcelain of the toilet. He wouldn't let her come in. She had stayed up reading to him through the thin partition door until dawn broke and the muezzin started up outside. Eventually when he was too weak to protest she dragged him back into the bedroom. She remembered bringing the bottle of warm cola to his lips, his head heavy in the crook of her arm. She summoned and replayed these images now. Time it seemed had both deepened and obscured their meaning. Then she thought of Søren. That night the

summer he was five, or maybe six, and had come into their room, backlit from the bare bulb on the little landing, Ana, his mother, beside her fast asleep, and how she had soothed him. How he had come to her and they had lain curled up like nested mice. His body hot through the flannel of his pyjamas, the puckered ridge the elasticated band had left against his waist. Her cool hand on his burning brow. And how by morning his fever had broken. How he was bright eyed again, transformed.

She thought about ordering a drink. A real drink. Something strong enough to nudge her in to another state but not so strong as to dull any of her senses, to leave her at any disadvantage. Something sweet and bitter and fizzing with a slice of citrus, a waxy half moon of lemon she could fish out with the straw and bite between sips of her bitter fizzing drink. She tried to signal the waiter, abandoned the idea, then changed her mind again and flagged him over. He had a boyish, doughy face, black hair lacquered and severely parted, an expression that wavered between moronic and saintly. And when he returned she observed the great formality with which the coaster, the glass, and then the leather bound check were set down in front of her. As if these were last things. As if this were some kind of sacrament.

Ana would be eating her lunch now, still at her desk, breaking the seal on the scratched Tupperware, the oily, unguent skins of the roast peppers, last night's left over rice, laughing with the junior doctors at the clinic. Søren would be at school, haring across the concrete playground with its primary coloured lines and curves. She had told Ana, in a text before she left her office, that she might be late back this evening. She wasn't sure. It was not uncommon. Meetings and panels, and the R.E.F. submission she was heading up took up much of her free time. But she sought to put herself beyond suspicion by camouflaging the message with a series of kisses: a

scattering of Xs that ran to two lines on the small screen of her phone. A plentitude that said 'I am too harassed and harried to be doing anything of consequence.' Xs that signaled this information was without hidden meaning. Xs that framed her as beyond deception, that said: I am simply working late. She did not know why she had done this.

She could leave at any time. She reminded herself of this. She could walk from the hotel bar, out past the doorman, she could jump on a tram and be at the school gates to meet Ana and Søren. They could go to the juice bar he liked and eat flapjacks and drink carrot juice with ginger; they could hear Søren's stories, inspect the day's grazes on his elbows and knees from his dives and sliding tackles. All this still lay within the realm of possibility. All those Xs meant nothing. Or rather they still meant something, they were real; they were genuinely authored in casual distraction: unpremeditated; meant. The delicate glass carapace of her life in all its ornament and order was unshattered.

It was raining still: she saw it on the shoulders of the new arrivals in the lobby. She pressed her painted lips to the rim of her drink. He would be here soon. Yes, he would be here any minute.