

Title: There's Something I Must Tell You

Length: 2,531 words

Author: RJ Stewart

Date of creation: June 26, 2016

Status: Unpublished draft

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RJ Stewart

My sister's call came just after my flight touched down in Auckland.

"There's something I must tell you!"

(We were only talking, not texting, but I am sure I heard an emoji and seven exclamation marks.)

We are not as close as you might think, my sister and I, although Mom brought us into the world just minutes apart. I live in London and she in Manchester, which in itself suggests many universes of separation. Even so, her tone suggested something important, at least to her. I quickly decided to listen, at least until the string of exclamation marks dropped to four or five, then I would find an explanation to hang up, such as bathroom or luggage retrieval.

I was on assignment for *Bookman's Journal of Fine Literature*, and the editors again were expecting a prompt filing of my story. Lately we at *Bookman's* (I say we, but actually I had nothing to do with the decision, which was entirely in the hands of the owners and their henchmen, the accountants, and their henchmen, the editors) had decided to expand our journal to include reviews and ruminations on visual art. Despite the mercenary aspects of the decision (bloody profits!), I actually thought the idea a good one. Where can one actually draw the line between literature and visual art? In my articles, I often reference images the great writers use in their literature. The principal consideration in assessing quality is the precision of the description. When handled by a master, the image is easily conjured but absent confining details that stifle the imagination. With visual art, the image is vivid but the detail regarding the idea that propels the artist is the vague component -- and the part which delights patrons because they *are free* to produce their own notions of purpose.

In both cases, oddly enough, it's the absence of something that informs the presence of it.

My editor wanted a review of the work along with an interview with the sculptor, who had been commissioned for a large installation in

an important park on a charming island just a short ride by ferry from New Zealand's largest city. The work had begun to attract a good deal of attention and was spurring airline ticket sales to the quaint islands "down under," famed for pristine natural beauty, warm and friendly people, and rare varieties of penguins.

I had come with excitement and enthusiasm. I read as much as possible about J, a Kiwi himself, and then we arranged a Skype call for pre-interview purposes. Remaining was to see his work for myself, arrange a photo shoot, and pull together my notes into a review for *Bookman's* glossy pages.

"Dad is dying!" she said, again with an exclamation point. I imagined a sad face, too, but the juxtaposition seemed inappropriately snide, even for me.

She said he had been taken quickly to the hospital overnight after falling down the flight of stairs at his home in the seaside village of Totnes. The doctors, she said with fewer exclamation marks, had diagnosed a stroke and she didn't know what else, which is entirely probable, because she knows nothing about either medicine or listening. She thought I should catch the earliest return flight to London.

A dying father is an inevitability for most of us. Only the unfortunate few who precede their parents in death are spared the comeuppance associated with death in the family. Lucky them, I suddenly thought. Perhaps Dad could wait until I finished my assignment! Yes, I actually thought of replying in that way, but then I pictured several rows of exclamation points followed by a long period of pouting silence from my sister. Years of pouting silence, perhaps.

"Perhaps Dad could hold on until I finish my assignment," I said.

Predictably, she said nothing.

"Hello?"

Nothing.

"Sis?"

Nothing.

The line went dead, so I was alone in a foreign country with an hysterical but vague report of my father's imminent death. I thought then of catching a flight, not to London, but to Tasmania, where our British ancestors once established a penal colony. It occurred to me that I would be very much at home there among the offspring of extortionists, debtors, and insurrectionists.

I tried to return her call and move ahead on a better note, but there was no answer. Faced with the prospect of (by order of importance) my sister's wrath and my father's death, I decided to catch the ferry to New Zealand's charming island and its popular sculpture park.

I thought I'd never get there. The ferry ride was pleasant enough. I was met by a smiling driver in a rusty Range Rover, evidently just returned from years of service in the African bush. He aimed the rattling behemoth at green pastures and rolling green hills dotted with sheep, safely grazing as if on personal display for Bach himself. We arrived at a nondescript, barbed-wire gateway, which the driver asked me to open and to shut once the Range Rover was through. We descended a steep and narrow dirt road before arriving at seaside, where several brilliant-white cottages huddled under a warm southern sky.

The proprietors offered their greetings and wide smiles, which I later suggested should be packaged and sold around the world in the interest of human relations and international peace. They ushered me to my cabin, where the unscreened doors stood wide open as if to minimize the demarcation between the natural and civilized worlds. I was quite nervous.

They instructed me to find the trail head "over there" as they pointed in the direction of nothing discernible but woods. I showered, collected myself, thought of my excitable twin sister and dying Dad, and then set out. After passing under a monolithic archway of polished stone, I wandered into a wooded world resplendent in October renewal. I passed by large sculptures here and there, placed privately so the art sojourner should have view of only one at a time. Eventually I stumbled upon a cabal of ceramic figures, ranked and filed as if off to combat.

The figures were exactly alike except for their size. Nearest me, they were chin high, and as I meandered toward the rear, they became smaller and smaller, until the figures in the last rank were barely shin-high. Each was dressed exactly the same but for color; all wore coveralls, and each had hands in pockets and hips thrust outward slightly, as if in subtle defiance. Hair style and hair color were identical, as were the male facial features of each.

As I returned to the front of the platoon, I imagined the artist intended to depict the labour force in the industrial age. Perhaps he meant to suggest the dehumanization of workers forced into livelihoods that remove individuality. Appropriate in that context, of course, is the militaristic formation.

I moved to the side, noticing that perspective changes when aligned objects, replications of human beings in this case, are viewed from

front, rear, side and corner. One can experience precisely the same thing by visiting one of those vast military cemeteries, where planners have erected small white crosses to remember the soldiers fallen in this or that invasion on the shores of whatever country. There's one in France, of course, and in Italy. Even England's Brookwood has such an arrangement. No doubt there are many, given the habit of periodic carnage political genius provides.

I soon realized, with fear, that it is perfectly appropriate that this platoon of duplicates should be arranged in a primeval setting, and best experienced alone. Most certainly, it was my imagination that caused these figures suddenly to move. When my eye caught a movement to my right, my head snapped attentively, only to be drawn to some similar movement in the rear, or on my left. If that weren't off-putting enough, I began to hear them speak. The words at first were not comprehensible, but then, with focus, I could make out a doleful plea:

"We are the same as you. We are the same as you. We are ..."

I literally ran from the sculpture park and back to my cabin. I changed into a swimming suit, and ran to the water, as if to wash away some parasite. When I thought I was out of sight, I crawled onto a cluster of jagged rocks and removed my trunks, the most un-English thing I could think of, and resumed my cleansing swim in the buff.

Only later, after a glass or two of fine New Zealand wine from the Marlborough District and a splendid meal of New Zealand lamb and grilled fresh garden vegetables, served with fresh smiles at the home of my hosts, did I collect myself enough to reflect on the ideas I had encountered. The movement and voices, of course, were merely my imagination. My reaction had been prompted, I reasoned, by the eeriness of being alone with realistic figures, repetitively arranged in a natural setting. It is profoundly meaningful, I found as I discussed the work with my hosts, to discover the idea that we exaggerate our independence. The elusive value of inner peace is best found, perhaps, in collection with others, once we realize we are not as unique and special as our parents would want to think.

As the evening wound down and I began thinking of a warm bed and a cool night by the sea, I was astonished to learn that the fun was just beginning, because I walked J. To my astonishment, he looked exactly like the forms in the park. Could it have been his own persona that he chose to depict in slavish conformity?

He shook my hand warmly and smiled broadly, a handsome compliance with the law someone evidently passed decades ago requiring all New Zealanders to be friendly and wear the mandatory smile, or face life in Tasmania or Australia, or worse, London. Our

hosts produced a sweet wine, this one from a local producer, and a bowl of fruit and a board of cheese, goat's and lamb's and cow's milk somehow transformed into wedges of wonder.

We drank for hours, listened to American jazz, discussed *J*'s works of art, and talked about the musical theater in which our hosts had invested and prospered. When I thought my body had given way to sensory overindulgence and peaceful exchange of ideas, *J* arose and approached me slowly.

"Did you see me in the forest?" he asked.

I assumed he meant his work of art, his sculpture, his idea of repetitive human condition, how vacant spaces inform occupied ones. I sat up as straight as possible, found words as best I could amongst my exhaustion.

"My father is dying," I said in a whisper.

I have no idea where it came from. In fact, I thought I had put my twin sister's emotional recounting out of my head and moved ahead dutifully. *J* looked at our hosts and then at me, and then back to our hosts. He stood motionless for a moment, then went to the bookshelf that lined the wall in the den, which itself was dimly lighted by the floodlights aimed opposite, toward the calm night sea.

"Is he like you?"

I did not know what to say. I assumed he referred to my father.

"I have some of his features," I said.

"And you have a brother, a sister perhaps? Or you are the only child?"

"A sister," I said. "My twin."

"And she looks like you?"

"Identical, except for gender."

There followed a long silence. My hosts held their wine in delicate glasses in their still laps. *J* stood in front of the books, his head statuesque in reflection. My furtive glances betrayed my fear of being somehow discovered, as if I were a spy on mission for a devious Bulgarian political conspirators.

"My friend," *J* finally began, "I could not be more honored with your discovery of my art and your inner *self*. When you return to London, I humbly and respectfully advise you to sit with your twin sister, drink and eat, and if you find the inspiration, laugh together as loudly as you can at the great joke the artist has done with his figures."

What conceit, I thought, implying he's The Great Artist. As if he were god or something. My infatuation with him, and the evening, waned quickly. I thanked my hosts, bid a good night to *J*, and retired.

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A few weeks later I sat with my sister in Totnes. We had agreed to meet to take care of Dad's affairs and his possessions. He had not lingered, thankfully. It wasn't a stroke, as my sister had described. She often gets the details confused. It was heart failure. I learned that he was revived long enough perhaps to understand that he would die soon. Within two days he was gone.

My sister had come from Manchester. I asked her to meet me at *The Black Lion*, the Kiwi-operated pub that I enjoyed when I visited Dad. We hugged warmly, she ordered white wine, something from the menu, and I asked for a second pint of the local brew, which I found quite satisfying.

"At least he didn't suffer long," I said.

She knifed her bangers and mash onto her fork and ate quietly. I let the moment arrive as if a night train from Edinburgh. I have found it best to let the conversation flow where Sis would like it to go. She seemed peaceful and surprisingly undramatic.

"He talked a lot in his last days," she said. "Very present, cogent certainly, but his mind was on people who were absent, gone. At lot about the war. Mentioned his mates, always kindly and with affection. He talked of their training days, how impressed he was with the order they found in military life, the cleverness of the marching formations. I think he was missing something. Mom maybe."

Evening settled over *The Black Lion*, and the wait staff lighted large gas lamps that cast a yellow hue across the outdoor dining area we had chosen. Wisteria draped overhead like a nursery blanket, its abundant clusters of blooms bathed in warm light. I noticed how Sis's sad eyes nevertheless danced in the evening light.

"Brother, how lovely are your eyes," she said, as if reading my mind.

"Ah! We're quite the pair!" I said with an exclamation mark.

"Thinking the same thoughts and all! Amazing, isn't it? Twins! Lookalikes having dinner! The staff must be astonished at how lined up we are, marching through this amazing life."

She smiled adoringly.

“I’m happy you got the beard and the hairy legs,” she said.

“And you, the boobs,” I said.

“Mistaken identities,” she said.

“A comedy of errors.”

We chuckled at our “twin jokes,” then we couldn’t stop.

Soon we were overcome with loud, uncontrollable laughter. The waiter turned to see, as did the many other diners, and soon the whole group laughed together, and none, even Sis and I, knew exactly why.