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3000 words

Blame Rupert

by Matias Travieso-Diaz

*Life is not complex. We are complex.
Life is simple and the simple thing is the right thing.*

Oscar Wilde

Toto, I've a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore... We must be over the rainbow!
Dorothy, The Wizard of Oz

Sean was only eleven when his family acquired Rupert, a shaggy wheat-colored Cairn terrier, bequeathed to them by Uncle Seamus when he packed up and left Dublin for a job in Saudi Arabia. “Dogs are considered unclean and are not allowed in that country, except for guides for the blind and the disabled” was his excuse for leaving Rupert behind.

The boy disapproved of the offhand way his uncle had let Rupert go. Seamus hardly said goodbye to the dog, who had barked and wagged its tail in great agitation and had tried to climb up its master’s leg without success. Sean felt sorry for Rupert and took it upon himself to adopt the scruffy animal and make it his pet.

At first, Sean had trouble getting accepted by Rupert as its new master. As most terriers, Rupert was clever, quick to bark, lively, feisty, and stubborn. It probably still felt it belonged to Seamus and resisted Sean’s orders, challenging his commands at every turn. Sean, who was not bossy by nature, had to discipline Rupert constantly just to prove he could make the dog do

things as he ordered. After a while, however, Rupert bonded with his young boss and, while still independent, became an impulsive and intense friend.

Rupert's outgoing personality contrasted with Sean's temperament. The boy was a tender-hearted weakling who, as he reached thirteen years of age and attained puberty, felt he was a poster boy for faggotry. He kept his feelings to himself, of course, but the self-loathing was always there, inches from the surface, raising its ugly head whenever the boy thought of himself as, to use his father's expression, "a damned queer."

He had opened up only to his next-door friend Lindsay, who was almost his same age but very different in personality. Where Sean was quiet and reserved, Lindsay was pleasing, friendly and outwardly charming. They had known each other since infancy and, to Sean's surprise and delight, their playful roughhousing as children had slowly given way to a sort of intimate touching that revealed that they shared a bond of sexuality that would soon bloom into a relationship.

One Sunday afternoon, after a day at the cinema in which they had thoroughly explored each other's body in the darkened theater, Lindsay declared: "Sean, do you want to become my boyfriend?"

Sean was excited but flabbergasted. "Yes, Lindsay, I really would like to do it. But I can't continue to keep my feelings hidden from everyone, particularly my folks. I'd have to come out to them before I became your boyfriend." Lindsay embraced his friend and, right in the middle of Belgrave Square, planted a wet kiss on Sean's mouth while squeezing his friend's buttocks. "Then you need to come out, pronto!"

Sean pushed Lindsay away. "Come on, Linny. Not in public!"

Lindsay pulled back but insisted: “I have the hots for you and don’t care if anyone knows about it. You have to open up! Being gay is not a crime anymore!”

Sean took leave from his friend and went into hiding in his room. Should he tell his mother? What would she say? Lucinda was a strict Catholic and frowned on any form of immorality. Homosexuality was seldom discussed in the household, but Sean was sure she would be horrified at his disclosure. And his father... there was no doubt what Angus O’Leary would say and do, and it was not pretty.

Over the next few days, Sean tried to avoid Lindsay while he attempted to sort out his conflicting emotions. Lindsay soon caught on to his friend’s ploy and confronted him: “Why are you giving me the cold shoulder? Don’t you like me anymore?”

Sean was apologetic. “I’m almost ready to come out, although I still worry about what will happen. But I just can’t bring myself to do it. I don’t know how to let my family know without hurting them and myself...”

Lindsay then made a suggestion. “You need to talk to an expert.”

“Do you know someone who can tell me how to do it?” asked Sean. “And don’t mention any teacher from this school.” The faculty of their middle-school was old fashioned, to say the least.

“How about having confession with one of the priests at Mary Immaculate?”

“Oh, please.... You know I’m not religious.”

“OK, how about this? My cousin Roddy once told me of a rumor that has gone around Dublin for a long time...”

“What kind of rumor?”

“Well, it’s sort of a fairy tale, but who knows? Are you familiar with the sculpture of Oscar Wilde they put up in Merrion Square in the late nineties?”

“I haven’t seen it, but I’ve heard the way it is described, something like The Fag on the Crag. Is that what you are talking about?”

“Yes. Well, Wilde was a famous Irish queer that went to prison for messing with young men over a hundred years ago, are you familiar with the story?”

“I vaguely recall hearing about it, but don’t know the details.”

“Never mind. The rumor is that if you go to Merrion Square at midnight and come to where the Wilde statue sits, you can ask him any questions and he’ll answer them for you. In life, Wilde was very smart and knew all the answers.”

“I don’t believe it.”

“Well, it’s incredible, but what if it is true? I bet Wilde could give you advice on the best way to come out.”

“That’s ridiculous. I’m not going to go to a park in the middle of the night to talk to a statue!”

“Look at it this way. The worst that can happen, you won’t get an answer to your question, but I’m sure Wilde won’t tell anyone. So, what do you have to lose?”

“Only feeling stupid, that’s all.”

“Well, it was only an idea. Anyhow, I really have the hots for you, so you better find a way to give me satisfaction or I’ll have to look for someone else, maybe that cute Barnwell kid...”

As days piled on each other, Sean's anxiety mounted. Lindsay was making good on his threat and was hanging out with the Cillian Barnwell boy, who was only eleven but very pretty. Sean started twice to have a talk with his mother about his "condition," but dropped it. Lucinda suffered from a weakened heart and was feeling arthritis pains in the shoulders and hips, and Sean felt reluctant to take a chance of aggravating her maladies. Sean became sort of constipated, his secret trying to burst out into the open without his being able to release it. He became irritable and was short with everyone, even Rupert, who displayed surprising forbearance at its master's moodiness.

Then came one Thursday in late April. It had been cold and windy most of the day and Rupert, reflecting the nasty weather outside, had barked constantly at every noise, getting increasingly on everyone's nerves. Finally, after dinner, Sean made a snap decision. This was as good a time as any to pay a visit to Mr. Wilde, and Rupert's antics provided cover for what otherwise would have been odd behavior on his part.

As bedtime approached and Rupert continued to bark and growl, Sean turned to his parents and declared, feigning exasperation: "I'm going to take this dog on a long walk so he will let off steam and quiet down. We'll go to Portobello for a while."

"Don't go there" retorted Lucinda. "It's getting pretty late and at this hour Portobello will be full of drunks and perverts."

"All right, then" replied Sean, pretending to give in. "I'll go towards Trinity instead. It should be quieter as long as I stay away from the campus."

"But..." started Lucinda, but Sean put his overcoat on quickly, tied a leash around Rupert's neck, and rushed out before she could raise any more objections.

It was a long walk from the family's apartment in Rathmines to the Merrion Square, near Trinity College, where the sculpture of Oscar Wilde sat. Sean tried to make haste out of fear that he may get there too late and miss a séance with Wilde's statue. Rupert trotted happily along, sensing that they had embarked on some enjoyable adventure. The last few blocks, coming up Fitzwilliam Place, Sean and Rupert were literally sprinting, both panting from the unusual exercise.

The park was not large; soon after entering the square from its southern end, Sean could make out by the light of the moon and the nearby buildings that there was a mound of rocks near the northwestern end of the square. He cast hesitation aside and, holding firmly Rupert's leash, approached the structure.

There it was: a life-size rendering of a long-haired middle-aged man, dressed in green, pink and grey clothes, all made of various stone materials. He was reclining in a casual, haphazard way on a large boulder, and displayed a sardonic expression on his face. His eyes focused on another statue, a nude bust of a man; a third statue of a pregnant woman sat nearby, forlorn.

Sean had no trouble figuring out what the grouping of statues represented. Wilde had been full of himself. He cared little for women but was attracted to males, and had a condescending attitude towards other people. Had he met Wilde in person, Sean would have found him intimidating.

The boy got so nervous that he almost turned around to return home, but managed to keep his emotions in check and placed himself right in front of the stone curb that separated the statue from the path where he and Rupert stood. In a small voice he started: "Mr. Wilde... Mr. Wilde?"

He could have sworn that the stone eyes of the statue turned away from the nearby nude and looked down on him. The leer in his expression changed to interest as he the reclining figure seemed to be focusing on Sean, perhaps sizing up the boy.

There was a pause as Sean, petrified with fear, tried to figure out what to say. The statue arched its eyebrows as if getting annoyed at the wait, and for a moment Sean feared that the interview would be over before it even started. He forced himself to continue.

“Mr. Wilde, Sir, I came to ask for your help with a very important question about my life. I am gay and would like to let my family and friends know about it, but don’t know how to do it. What would be the best way for me to come out?”

The stone eyes of the statue seemed to roll in its sockets and its mouth spread wide open in mirth. An unearthly voice, resonant like a rumbling of distant thunder and at the same time dripping with irony, sounded inside Sean’s head:

“I never voluntarily revealed myself as a gay man. To the contrary, I was denounced as a sodomite by the father of my lover, sued him for defamation and lost, and then I was charged with moral turpitude and put in jail for two years. I only dealt with my true nature when I was in prison. I spent most of my life trying to avoid having to do what you are so keen on doing. Why are you bothering me with this?”

Sean convulsed in tears, shaken. He felt humiliated and ashamed. He hunched his shoulders and turned around as if to retreat, but the statue continued, now in a kinder tone: “But, if for some reason you need to confess your true nature, the best way to do it is to keep it simple. Write a short note making a complete disclosure. Keep it next to you when you go to bed and read it again the following morning to make sure it says exactly what you mean. Then go to your parents and read it aloud.”

Sean started to thank the statue for what, in retrospect, was an obvious piece of advice, but at that point Rupert began barking loudly and attempted to climb the rock slab where Wilde's statue rested. Sean was almost unable to control his pet and, as they struggled, steps were heard approaching from the other end of the green. Sean pulled on the leash viciously and yanked Rupert away, and the pair managed to leave undetected. It was not until they were halfway home that Sean realized he had failed to thank Wilde.

At home, they found Lucinda awake, sitting by the front door on her armchair. She greeted them angrily: "Where have you been? It's nearly two in the morning!!"

"Sorry, mum" apologized Sean, catching his breath. "You won't believe this, but Rupert was still barking like a dog possessed until only a few minutes ago!" Beside him, Rupert looked up sheepishly.

Sean was always a good boy and Lucinda had no reason to suspect he had done anything wrong. "You'll be the death of me! Go to bed! We'll have a talk in the morning!"

As he took off his sweat-drenched clothes, Sean reflected on the odd adventure he had just gone through. Talking to a statue was far-fetched enough; receiving personal advice from a long-dead man of letters was totally incredible. *Wait until I tell Lindsay. He won't believe it either.*

He was putting on his pajamas when he recalled Wilde's advice and remembered he had to write a note to his parents before going to bed. He was undecided as to what to say, and even whether to write anything at all. Then he concluded that it would be ungrateful on his part not to follow Wilde's instructions. Taking a pen and a sheet of paper from the nightstand drawer, he scribbled the following:

“Dear Mum and Dad: You are very important to me, so I need to tell you that I am gay. I have been gay all my life, and will continue to be gay until I die. There is nothing you did that has driven me to fancy boys rather than girls. I hope you can accept me as I am and continue giving me your love and support.

Your loving son,

Sean”

He read the short message over and over, and was unsatisfied with it. Should he say more? Should he make any promises? Should he offer to move out if the family chose to disown him?

He found no answers to those and many other questions that suddenly assailed him, but he was dead tired and decided to let these matters remain unresolved until the morning. He fell into a deep sleep the moment his head hit the pillow.

When he woke up, his first thought was to throw away the draft he had written and revisit the entire issue again. Maybe he would not need to come out at all. He was going to do it mainly for Lindsay, but his friend had proved less than trustworthy. Maybe he should not inflict pain on his parents. Perhaps he would wait until he was of age, or one day leave town the way Uncle Seamus had, and would not need to come out until then, if at all...

He was still ensnared in those confusing thoughts when he reached for the note he had written and left on top of the nightstand before going to bed. It was not there.

He began searching frantically for the note, on the floor, behind the night table, and under the bed. He was on his knees when the door to his bedroom opened and his parents walked in. Lucinda was holding the note in her hand. She had been crying.

“Couldn’t you at least have told us directly?” she asked, reproach and disappointment in her voice.

Sean was at a loss for words. His father then piped in: “It was quite craven to send Rupert as your messenger instead of telling us face to face yourself!”

“I didn’t send Rupert to carry that note... I was thinking of throwing it away!”

He looked down and there was Rupert, hiding under the bed.

“Rupert! Bad boy! Why did you do this?!!”

Rupert barked just once, in a low tone that seemed almost contrite.

“What possessed you to do this?” he asked again, and the implausible answer came back immediately. “You talked to you-know-who, right?”

Rupert emerged from under the bed and shook its head up and down once.

Sean realized that this was an impossible conversation to hold with Rupert in front of his folks. “Alright, I’ll get you later.” Then, facing his parents, he asked the truly important question. “Never mind how you got my note. What did you think about it?”

Lucinda took two steps forward, lifted him off the floor, and clutched him in her arms. “Sean, you are still my only son and the light of my life. I don’t understand it, but if you choose to lead your life that way, I’ll give you my blessing and all my support.” Her embrace was so tight that Sean could hardly breathe.

Raising his head, Sean’s eyes locked on his father’s. Angus O’Leary’s face was a rigid mask. “I think you are a degenerate” he said in a low, dangerous tone. Then he went on: “But, as your mother says, you are *our* degenerate. I will not condone your behavior but will support you no matter what you do, as long as it is not criminal.” This, Sean surmised, was as close to acceptance as he would ever get from his dad. And that was good enough.

Freeing himself from his mother's grip, Sean bent down, grabbed Rupert by the collar, and whispered: "You're a clever dog, but this is a bit much. I reckon you told the statue that I am indecisive and he directed you to help me carry his instructions. That turned out fine, but in the future let me make my own decisions, will you?"

Rupert averted its eyes and yawned noncommittally.

END