

“‘twas but a dreame of thee.”

by *Charlie Cochrane and Jaccers*

A story in the alternative Cambridge Fellows universe, a place where anything might—and usually does—happen. Any resemblance to persons living or dead is only partly intentional.

Cambridge November 1906

It was Saturday, but Coppersmith and Stewart couldn't dine at *The Bishop's Cope*. Some wag had decided to take up a friend's challenge and drag a cow, a fully-grown Friesian, into the pub's kitchen. The cow was, unsurprisingly, extremely upset by the experience and manifested this distress in copious quantities. The wag had been made to pay for—indeed take part in—the cleaning and to compensate the loss of takings. He'd ended up severely out of pocket and Coppersmith and Stewart had ended up in *The Mackerel*.

They viewed the menu with a degree of suspicion. Jonty couldn't shake off the uncomfortable feeling this establishment naturally produced, given it had been the scene of one or two undergraduate misdemeanours. Orlando was equally perturbed, as he'd only just got used to regularly eating at *The Bishop's Cope*, which he trusted. His favourite dish, steak and kidney pudding, wasn't present on *The Mackerel's* bill of fare, but oyster pie was.

“Do you think that I should venture it, Dr. Stewart?”

Jonty grinned. “I will if you will, Dr. Coppersmith. And a pint or two of stout to wash it down.”

The pie proved rich and tasty, although for Jonty there was a lingering suspicion that one or two of the oysters might have been past their prime. If they had ever seen a prime in the first place. The beer was thick and tasty, though, which made Orlando slightly unsteady and slurred in tone, so when they slid back to St Bride's their progress was neither direct nor elegant. They parted at the porters' lodge, the pie lying so heavily on their stomachs making any further enjoyment of each other's company not a pleasant prospect. They wanted their own beds and bathrooms and no risk of embarrassment.

Jonty made his way up the staircase to his set with an unsteady heavy tread, a slow nauseated burning in the pit of his raging, stomach, a burning that seemed determined to snake its way up slowly towards his throat. He'd never suffered from sea sickness in his life and he imagined this particular sense of ill feeling as being exactly what Orlando, who did suffer that particular malaise, had described at painful length. It was not the pints of bitter causing this distress, for they hadn't imbibed enough of the potent brew. Jonty had a sinking feeling that the oyster pie might be the culprit. He stopped, gripped the banister and willed the spasm to pass before continuing to his rooms at a quicker pace.

Finding his key, he shakily opened his door then rushed straight for his medicine cabinet, looking frantically for the bicarbonate of soda. On finding the brown glass jar, he mixed a small quantity with a glass of water and swallowed the vile concoction. It didn't seem to help. He stripped off his upper layers of clothing, not caring where they dropped, then filled the sink with cold water and splashed at his face and neck, trying to cool the feverish burning encompassing him. Deciding to give the physic time to work its healing magic on a dreadfully unsettled stomach, he tried to push aside any nauseous feelings; even at his drunken youthful revels he hadn't felt as green about the gills as this.

Unwilling to find refuge in sleep, Jonty picked up a beloved volume of John Donne's works

from his bedside table. Flicking on the lamp, he sank weakly onto his bed, hoping the poet would serve as a distraction for his bilious stomach.

Pulling the eiderdown over his legs, he snuggled down and started to read. After ten minutes or so, Donne's beautiful words began to blend into one long sentence, the soothing effect of the text hypnotic upon Jonty's overwrought senses. He found his eyes closing and, rather than fight the healing properties of slumber, acquiesced to the beckoning arms of Morpheus. Swirling colours began to paint a kaleidoscope of patterns across his mind. Jonty felt light headed, as if his body was floating on air, and all the while the world as he knew it rushed by, like an artist's canvas of his life. The murders at the college, the trauma of facing his past, and then the beginning of healing of a deep wound, brought about by his unexpected relationship with Orlando. That was a joy gift beyond all expectation, even beyond Donne's expressive words.

Twice or thrice had I lov'd thee, Before I knew thy face or name; So in a voice, so in a shapeless flame ...

Jonty slept.

Orlando felt better once the room had stopped spinning, a habit it had taken to adopting whenever he had imbibed more than a pint of beer. He felt rather perturbed and not a little anxious; suddenly the relatively short distance between his bedroom and the bathroom seemed a void without measure. Sleep on the settee could be the solution, shortening the distance by half, but nightclothes were an impossibility (requiring an inordinate amount of co-ordination he didn't possess at present) so he decided to sleep in his shirt and underwear. He knew his mother would have been horrified at anything so slovenly, but he elected to retain his vest as a small concession.

His fitful slumbers, uneasily reached as the pie sped around his alimentary canal, were ended by a rat-tat-tatting on his door. He knew who it would be, of course—only one person was quite so determined and such a bloody nuisance with it. It felt like three o'clock in the morning, but his eyes persuaded him that there was sufficient light to make it seven or eight, so murder of said pest would have to wait till another day when it would be more justified. He opened the door with a gruff, "This had better be worthwhile, Jonty," only to be stopped short by the vision he encountered.

Jonty was dressed in the most gorgeous red slashed velvet doublet that Orlando had ever seen. Not that he had seen that many, except in Elizabethan portraits. A vague memory of a discussion the night before about a Tudor themed day in the English department swam through the murky waters of his brain. Jonty had obviously obtained a spectacular costume—probably employing his mother's influence—and was trying it out. In that it was proving a great success, making Orlando grow very hot under the collar. Only he seemed not to be wearing a collar, which was odd, given that he'd gone to sleep in his short without removing it.

"John, what a sight thou art! Did the ale not agree with thee? A pint or two more than was wise, sir?" A huge grin broke over Jonty's face and he strode into the room, seating himself in front of the fire and poking it into life.

Orlando smiled at the period speech, even if he was disconcerted at being addressed by a different name. He was about to make a witty riposte when he noticed Jonty's wig. A very authentic looking hairpiece, with long blonde locks that set off the man's handsome features well and added to the Tudor appearance.

Two could play at this game.

“I think that the oyster pie may have been a little over-rich sir. More to thy tastes.” Orlando felt smug at his use of what he thought were appropriate words—a smugness that fled when he looked around his room in an effort to locate his trousers. Everything looked different. It was the same room and the same view from the window, although the panes looked newer, but the contents resembled something from a Tudor portrait. That bugger Jonty had obviously been in during the night and changed all his things for old fashioned ones. And in the process he had changed Orlando’s attire for an antique night gown.

“Dr. Stewart, what have you been up to?” A joke was all very well, but there were lengths beyond which a chap should not go.

Jonty looked puzzled. “Stewart? I understand thee not, sir. Does the beer still addle thy wits?” Orlando fumed, “Stop this charade right now, Jonty. I haven’t the wit or patience for it this morning.”

Jonty chuckled. “I have seen thee out of thy wits before, but this will wear the crown among our exploits. Come sit here.” He drew Orlando down onto the padded bench that had somehow been manoeuvred into the set of rooms in the night. Jonty looked at him exactly as if he were a rather slow child being given his first lessons. “My name is Hen-ry Wri-oth-es-ley, as thou well know’st. Now say it with me. Hen-ry—come sir this must be done—Wri-oth-es-ley. Excellent! Now thou remembrest, although it might be more familiar to thee as *sweet Henry, do not go Henry, stay with me this night Henry.*” He laughed heartily, rose and poked the fire again. “Now, dress thyself more seemly and we will find a place to break our fast.”

Jonty awoke to a furious rapping and pounding; once deciding that the hullabaloo was not indeed his own head thumping away like a hammer on an anvil, he pulled the pillow over his face and tried to ignore the battering sounds coming from his door.

If that is Orlando, he would take great pleasure in throttling him senseless. But the banging and hollering increased in tempo until Jonty, using an imaginative stream of invective, climbed grumpily out of his warm inviting bed and stomped off to give the man a piece of his mind.

His set of rooms were in darkness, the heavy drapes still drawn, and as he staggered about Jonty stubbed his toe on the corner of a chair, which didn’t improve his sour mood. He wrenched open the door—and why he had to rise from his bed to do so, given that Orlando had his own key, was even more annoying—and let rip.

“Orlando, I swear I shall take great delight in making your life as absolute a misery as you have made mine. What on earth are you doing up and about at this time of the morning? This had better—” Jonty stood the door mouth gaping in shock as he took in the vision that was Orlando Coppersmith. Was he delirious or running mad? He shook his head to try to clear his befuddled mind, but to no avail. No, Orlando had to be the insane one, standing in the doorway dressed in Elizabethan costume.

Jonty blinked uncertainly as the vision—in a blue velvet slashed doublet, a paler blue silk pulled through the slashes, and a crimson cloak tossed rakishly over his shoulder—gave him a puzzled look as he entered the room. Orlando carelessly flung off said cloak then moved across the room to pull open the curtains. The bright sun flooding in made Jonty immediately shut his eyes against the sudden explosion of light assaulting his aching head. He flinched, groaned and collapsed onto his sofa but the softness he expected wasn’t there.

“What the hell?” he shouted as his backside connected with timber and not upholstery. What had happened? The room itself looked familiar, the windows were in the same place but the furniture wouldn’t have been out of place in one of Cambridge’s expensive antique shops. It

certainly wasn't his comfortable old sofa on which he was reclining: actually none of the furniture was his.

"God's teeth Henry, thou dost look a woeful sight. Did thou imbibe too freely of the grape last night? Come my lord, make haste, get thee dressed, our horses await us. The fresh air will do thee good and sweep the cobwebs from thy mind." The apparition chivvied and fussed, sounding mightily amused at Jonty's predicament. Jonty felt an overwhelming urge to murder his lover right there, slowly and painfully. While he'd normally be ready for any practical joke, his fragile state of mind and body this morning meant that his sense of humour wasn't up to arsing about. All he wanted to do was go back to bed. And what was this *idiot* doing prattling on about horses? Orlando couldn't abide the equine species and abhorred riding.

"Horses? And who the ruddy hell is Henry? Look, any other time this would be funny, but not this morning. That bloody pie must have been on the turn." Jonty lay back against the settle, closed his eyes and willed himself to wake up from this nightmare, vowing never to eat oyster pie again.

"Has the wine addled thy reason, Henry my love? Stop playing the fool, for the horses are over eager to be exercised and champing at the bit to be off. Drink this—it will make thee feel better." Orlando cruelly waved a goblet under Jonty's nose.

The smell of the wine making him retch, Jonty jumped off the settle and raced towards the sink, nearly tripping over his nightshirt in the process. He reeled to a halt hand clapped over his mouth: nightshirt? Jonty recollected going to bed partially clothed, but certainly not wearing an antique nightshirt. And where in god's name was the sink? Looking about and finding what looked like a chamber pot, he snatched it up and was promptly sick into it. Orlando knelt beside him and mopped at his brow with a fine linen handkerchief. "Forgive me, my love. I did in truth not think thee to be so ill. Shall I fetch the physician? Thou must be suffering from an ague and be delirious to keep calling me Orlando when thou knowest full well I am your John. Hast thou been reading Will's play again, to confuse thee so? Come, let me get thee abed. Ar't sure I cannot fetch the physician?"

The not-quite-Orlando slung his arm over his shoulders and half dragged him to the bed. Jonty felt a curious sense of detachment, a sense of watching a strange tableau unfolding before his very eyes. *My rooms but not my furniture, my lover face but not Orlando's name, and this peculiar garb. This must be the worst nightmare I ever had.* He felt himself being tucked up in bed, the pillows being plumped and puffed up behind his shoulders. Not-quite-Orlando took hold of his hand and brushed lips across his knuckles.

"I shall be back anon, my lord."

Jonty watched as the man left, a nagging sense of recognition tugging at the back of his mind. This John's face was dreadfully familiar and he had called Jonty both my lord as well as Henry. Then there'd been a mention of a play of Will's. A glimmer of light began to dawn: the face that was so familiar, of course he would know it. He'd only been studying the man's portrait the previous morning, as well as reading his work before sleep claimed him.

John Donne. In this dream or hallucination or whatever it was, Orlando was John Donne—or vice versa—and he thought Jonty was Henry Wriothesley, the Earl of Southampton and Will Shakespeare's patron. And in this strange place, Donne was Southampton's lover.

Jonty closed his eyes, lay back against the pillows and willed a proper, dreamless sleep to come, for when he woke all would be back to normal. He felt a cool cloth bathe his fevered brow and opened his eyes reluctantly. John had returned, sitting beside him tenderly dabbing at his forehead, with a cloth dipped in a bowl of cool water.

"John Donne..." Jonty let the name roll off his tongue experimentally and was rewarded with a glowing smile from the man himself.

"Henry Wriothesley. My dearest, most affectionate lord." He traced a gentle finger down

Jonty's face. "*I wonder by my troth, what thou, and I did, till we loved? Were we not wean'd till then? But suck'd on countrey pleasures, childishly? Or snorted we i'the seven sleeper's den? Twas so; But this, all pleasure's fancies be. If ever beauty I did see, Which I desir'd, and got, 'twas but a dreame of thee.*"

Despite the after effects of the oyster pie, Jonty's heart leapt. This must be how Orlando felt when he quoted sonnets to him during their intimate moments together. But now the tables were turned; it was all too confusing.

At last it had penetrated Orlando's head that he was dreaming. The ale had definitely fuddled his wits, because it had taken him an age to abandon the notion of being a victim of a practical joke. That had been discarded when he saw the changes had occurred not just to his room but to the city itself. Not even the formidable resources of that formidable lady, Hyacinth Stewart herself, could have managed to change the architecture of Cambridge overnight. He'd dabbled with the idea of being victim of a one of Dr. Panesar's time machines, but couldn't see how he could have entered such a contraption, even if he had managed to walk all the way to the Physics department in his sleep.

So, a dream it had to be: a vibrant experience that eventually saw him, Dr Orlando Coppersmith, striding the streets of Cambridge in a black velvet doublet with a matching cloak lined with indigo silk and someone who looked identical to Jonty but who seemed to be the Earl of Southampton, at his side. He, according to the strange logic of the unconscious world, was apparently John Donne. This caused a few problems as he couldn't remember a word of the Donne poems that Jonty had lovingly read to him. Worse than that, he hated the things, as they contained rather unnecessary language, so if the Earl was expecting a stream of fine verse he would be sorely disappointed he'd have to whistle for it.

If he were to be given the pleasure of such a realistic dream, why couldn't he be Newton, or someone else whose work he could understand and whose brain he could more happily inhabit? It was so unfair.

Jonty-who-was-Henry took him to a tavern where a posset was ordered, Orlando had never had one of these before and when it came, he eyed it with suspicion. But under his lover's nagging he attempted the drink, finding it surprisingly pleasant and soothing to his aching head and queasy stomach. Which was all very odd, because he was presumably only dreaming the queasiness and headache—and the posset too.

"When thou has't quite recovered, I would be delighted to hear the new verse that has been entertaining thy thoughts these last days. Come, never look so shy, sir. Thou has't promised it to me time and again. I have not a jot of patience left."

Orlando's jaw dropped. He couldn't remember more than the odd word of Donne's poetry, in spite of the numerous and most intimate times he'd heard it. Even in a stupid dream he would have to give account of himself, or he might find himself called out. Or something equally silly and Elizabethan. He recalled his favourite advice to his students—*write about what you know, not what you suppose or don't understand*-- he would have to try to produce an ode about something he was familiar with and the face in front of him provided inspiration. The total transformation of his life that had been occasioned by Jonty Stewart.

"My verse is still untutored and unfinished, my lord, but what I have I will share with thee." Jonty would have called this 'busking', thinking on your feet as quickly as possible to get yourself through a tricky situation. Orlando busked as if his life depended on it.

*Half a life in night I lay, one year for every hour twixt light and light,
Till long awaited morn broke in the Morningstar of thine eye
Ne'er again will I benighted rest as I unhap'ly slept before thy dawning*

Golden dreams and sweet slumbers now are mine since all days start and end with thee.”

Henry-not-quite-Jonty smiled kindly and ruffled Orlando’s hair. “Not the most accomplished of thine offerings, but the words touch me greatly. That is assuming that I am their intended recipient? They would work as well for our Saviour.”

“They are written for one whose face thou see’st in thy glass my lord.” Orlando, pleased with how he was managing this Tudor language nonsense, finished his drink.

“Then they are more precious to me than all the mightiest works of the London stage.” He leaned over as if to plant a kiss on his lover’s cheek, but instead whispered in his ear. “Drink up, sir. The day is but young and I can think of many a pleasure we might share before she reaches her womanhood.”

Orlando, puzzled at the mention of females, suddenly twigged that clever allusions were being made. Although his grin disappeared when he realised what might be being suggested here: he was being propositioned, and that led to some interesting ethical arguments. He had always vowed that he would never kiss anyone except Jonty, but this was a dream, so he wasn’t sure it counted. Secondly, the man with him *was* Jonty to all intents and purposes, being his double in both looks and voice. Thirdly...but he could not formulate a thirdly, which upset his mathematical mind, because he was being pulled out of his seat and bundled into the street, heading back for his college and, presumably, to one of their rooms.

Jonty watched as the servant, whom he presumed was his own, brought in the food requested by John and placed it on a table in the bedroom. Even though he knew this was just a dream, Jonty was determined to enjoy every moment of it. Leaning back against the pillows he smiled at such a diverting flight of fancy, coming to the conclusion that it might even have been worth eating that dreadful oyster pie, if this were the result.

The servant turned and bowed. “I have seen to it that thy horses have been stabled my lord, does thee have all that thou requir’st?”

“For the moment yes, much obliged to you.” Jonty thought it best to avoid making a mistake over the man’s name. He had only a theoretical idea how people in Elizabethan times treated their servants so he resorted to using his own good manners and breeding. He risked a glance at John, who had moved off the bed to collect the tray, to see if the man had noticed anything strange about his behaviour. The servant deferentially bowed again and discreetly left the room.

Jonty sat on the bed, his legs tucked up under his nightgown and arms wrapped loosely around his knees while he watched John cut thick slices of what he called manchet bread, which he knew was made of the finest wheat. It was a luxury that only the richest people could afford to eat with any regularity in Tudor times: Wriothesley’s fortunes seem to parallel his own family’s income. John smothered the slices of bread with thick yellow butter then passed them Jonty along with a tankard of ale. Jonty sniffed cautiously before taking an experimental sip. It tasted different to what he was used to, but given this was a dream, anything could happen so, with a slight shrug of his shoulders he decided to play along with his subconscious.

“I regret our not being able to ride this morning John. Please accept my apologies.”

“There is always tomorrow. Dost thou feel better after some ale and food? I find after a night of carousing such as we partook of last night that some watered ale will ease the queasiness somewhat.” John spoke in between mouthfuls of bread and beer.

“What exactly did we do last night? I find I have no recollection. I seem not to be myself this morning.” Which was an understatement. Jonty reached over, took the knife from John’s hand and helped himself to more bread and butter. He was beginning to enjoy himself.

“My love, do’st thou truly not remember?” John sat back to study Jonty with a raised eyebrow and a twitch of his lips.

“Nay John, in truth I do not.” Jonty replied, his mouth full of bread and butter.

“Shall I act it out for thee, my lord?” John smirked as he reached over and grabbed Jonty’s hand to pull him close.

That will teach me for playing with fire.

How could Jonty extract himself from this particular situation? He found Donne the poet fascinating but was damned certain he didn’t want him for a lover. Not even in a dream. Besides which, dream or not Orlando would never forgive him. “Ah, I feel a small recollection of later happenings but I am truly foggy about our carousing.”

“Oh, ’tis of no importance what we did earlier, Henry. I have the desire to show thee our carousing of later.” As John made a move to embrace him, Jonty leapt out of bed like a scalded cat, feet tangling in his nightgown. He landed in an ungainly tangle, so John hurried over and helped him to his feet. “Come my dear. Thou wast not shy last night.”

“Ah... well, see John...I...” Jonty stammered. It would be just his luck that Orlando would make an appearance in the dream just as he was trying to extract himself from a compromising situation and although his friend and lover’s sense of humour had improved since they had first met, Jonty doubted even *his* clever tongue could talk his way out of this dilemma. “I still feel ill.”

Why couldn’t he wake up right now?

“Fie on you, my lord. Thou didst eat more than thy fair share of breakfast...ill indeed.” John rolled his eyes. “Come here and let me kiss thee, for thou shall forget thy illness in mine arms.”

“What if my illness is catching?” Jonty asked, manoeuvring himself behind the settle.

“Pfft...oh cruel jesting heart.” John smiled and moved around the obstacle. “Do’st thou think me craven? Henry forsooth, you are an entertaining wretch to make such a game.”

Oh blast it. He thinks I am playing a lover’s game with him. “I...well... you see John...oh dash it. What if we are interrupted?”

“I gave orders for us not to be disturbed, my love, for thou art indisposed and I am caring for thee. Come tarry no longer. I wish to prove my affectionate devotion to my dearest lord.”

John he took hold of Jonty’s arms.

Jonty licked his lips nervously, wondering how on earth he was going to extract himself now. He couldn’t exactly explain that he wasn’t really Henry Wriothesley, but what would happen if he didn’t wake up? He desperately hoped that if Orlando was dreaming because of that woeful pie, he was at least experiencing something less like Alice in Wonderland. He fully expected the Mad Hatter to show up any moment.

As John’s mouth lowered to his, Jonty scrunched up his eyes, thinking he was about to get his just desserts for being such an ass as to think that he was actually enjoying this dream. He *never* wanted to see, smell, hear mention of oyster pie again! A pair of wet lips touched his...

Drip. Drip.

Jonty wiped at his face, thinking John Donne was a sloppy kisser, nowhere near as accomplished as Orlando.

Drip. Drip.

He opened one bleary eye, afraid of what he might see. A glass tumbler was on its side, the water in it spilling across his bedside table and dripping slowly over the side onto his face. He sat bolt upright in bed, patting his chest and pulling back the eiderdown to see what clothes he was wearing. His own, he realised with a gasp of relief. The room was his own, the furniture was his own, too. He started to laugh, despite his thumping head and queasy stomach, and only then noticed the book of Donne’s poetry beside his pillow. Still chuckling, he shook his head at his fanciful dream and the shock it had given him. Never again would he

go to bed with a queasy stomach and an overactive imagination.

He'd have a bath, then go out and get some fresh bread rolls and call on Orlando. Wouldn't he have a laugh when he heard about the dream and what a close call it had been?

On his way back from the bakery Jonty picked up a copy of *the Times*; he knew how Orlando loved to share the paper over coffee, taking the opportunity to discuss the news of the day, especially if the society pages contained stories of Jonty's mother and her friends.

As he flicked through, a small headline almost made him drop the bag of rolls.

EARLY DONNE POEM DISCOVERED.

He stood in the middle of the pavement gawping like a village idiot at the extraordinary coincidence. Orlando would be amazed. He set off with an excited trot more suited to a dunderhead than a fellow of St Brides, bounding like an overgrown puppy all the way to Orlando's set of rooms. Once there, he thumped noisily on the door, heedless of the row he was making. Only then he remembered that he had a key.

The Earl took Orlando up to his own rooms. It was Jonty's set, of course, just as Orlando knew that it would be, although the Tudor furniture and objects made it seem unfamiliar. As he expected, he was embraced by Henry the minute they'd closed the door and furious kisses were rained on his hair and ears, the only parts he was letting Southampton have access to until he'd solved his moral dilemma. Salvation appeared to have come in the form of someone knocking at the door. This furious rat-tat-tatting increased in volume until Orlando's eyes, which he had shut tight at Wriothesley's first assault, sprang open, catching sight of photographs and modern furniture.

He had a simultaneous realisation that the knocking wasn't due to some Elizabethan servant but most likely announced the arrival of the genuine Jonty Stewart, at the portals to Orlando's set. He rose from the couch with a genuine hangover this time and no prospect of a posset to quell it. He jerked open the door just as Jonty had unlocked it with his key, causing the man to fall into the room on top of him.

"Orlando, you great pudding, what on earth are you playing at? You look terrible, although I suppose I look no better. Anyway, you simply have to see what's in the paper." He brandished *the Times* under Orlando's nose.

"What are you going on about?"

"They've discovered a new Donne poem, an early one. Not very good but rather sweet. As though he were finding his poetical feet. It begins *Half a life in night I lay, one year for every hour twixt light and light*. Orlando, are you alright? You look awfully pale. Shall I fetch Nurse Hatfield? Orlando...?"