

A Bouquet for a Grave

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Foreword

'A Bouquet for a Grave' is not a clinical piece in the usual form, but is an attempt to show understanding from the work. It illustrates the belief, made popular by RD Laing, that apparent madness can make more sense and is likely to be a response to a particular context and its confusions.

I

There was a man who lived and died.

He lived silenced for most of his years, and talk of him is easier since he is dead, and his only interested relative soon to leave the living.

He was a man I knew. We exchanged few enough words and he sent me one letter.

While I skipped by in light expectancies, he stayed fixed. His bleak winter began too soon in his youth. He accepted there could be no summer for him, yet he expected a full flowering for me.

He was called Maurice Moore.

II

There was this man whose life in our town was not unduly troubling, but some few moments with him seeped beneath the skin to stay with me.

Maurice Moore, as one of the seeds from childhood which take long years to show growth, is now a comforting notion of continuity.

He loomed in our orbit. Maurice Moore was a fixture and seemed forged of some alien substance you couldn't move through. Or was it some later process which had transformed him into synthetic clay – baked in a fiery furnace and then glazed? He remained impenetrable. Yet through this man questions were shaped as he lived amongst us, and dug our ditches and graves.

Maurice Moore was tall and thickened, though not fleshy; he stood muscular and solid. He worked outside at physical labour, carried no fat and had a permanent weather-beaten colouring, light mud-brown with a hint of orange. It did not entirely suit him, as dyed hair usually did not quite fit the middle aged.

He took up a monolithic place, unchanging.

Maurice Moore was there when I was born, he stayed much the same as I grew. When I went back with adult guilt, the man had died.

III

By staying rigid he showed how others shifted and moved; beside him I realised the rest of us were not clinging to empty shells of ourselves. If he tried to run, or play, it seemed he might disintegrate. He was on permanent guard, having, he said, once been the undoing of himself. He was just inevitably there, yet his fixity made me aware of what we took for granted of ourselves. Everyone else was woven of different strands, and like Persian rugs, could be observed from different angles. In Maurice Moore, however, the weave in fine colouring somehow broke, beyond mending, then some uniform plastic covering was fitted over it all. “Burnt out,” he declared of himself. It was only later I understood “burnt out schizophrenic” was a category he'd been given.

IV

The words they gave children were inadequate, “he's just a bit slow, that is all”.

“A bit slow” was a confusing category. It took no account of his being less than he had once been. When asked, adults reluctantly gave impoverished words, obliterating a history which imprisoned him. The town took him at face value. He was accepted but, having been reduced on his home ground, could not restore himself.

But he couldn't just be slow, where I was quick, if he'd once been faster. How my gullibility amused when I reported back he'd been to Cambridge, that great and distant pinnacle. Now he was down in our ditches! "Sent to the colonies," he declared. "So as not to further embarrass a highly respectable family."

I came across him and sat to dangle limbs over his familiar strangeness down there with his spade.

He wasn't of our soil, just put there, immobile, to stay out of place. He was stuck on guard against himself, in our earth, which produced strange mosses and tree ferns. He had been cast out, losing connection to his own ground, with its cowslips along those distant paths.

V

Once upon a time, Maurice tried to find his way but his father lay across the path.

It was his brother, Raphael Moore, whom I found in England, who recalled a past Maurice had forgotten. It was the electric shocks, his brother thought. But what if he could not bear to remember, as his parents could not face what happened to their son? They arranged to stick him, like a post, in a far country. He could not move in the wind with our bending trees.

He might not grow from the ground to which he was sent, but he cut into it, slicing down with his spade to make a space for death. Himself a living defeat, he arranged for that inevitable collapse out of life which colonial progress could barely accommodate.

VI

Stories warn of troubled souls who disturbed the living. The dead should go in peace. But what could the troubling soul of a living man do?

His vitality removed, Maurice Moore could be packed across the world to labour.

"My fire is already extinguished," he told his brother just before he left. "We each get a certain spark and mine went off like a rocket." Burnt out at twenty-six.

He lived then died, as all men do, but for forty-three years that he was a wounded specimen of the human race seemed not an issue to the community where he was banished.

And having fought his father and lost, he seemed to accept his fate. He said, "Here there is no need to wipe me out further – there, I'd have been kept a lunatic."

He was taken in and given a place and remained absurdly grateful. "Harmless enough" they said of him, letting him play the idiot in local repertory productions.

His family no longer wanted him in sight, with us he was accepted as "thick".

He came from the most orderly of gardens, until he grew as a rank weed to be eradicated, "for the cultivation of the good", his brother believed. There was no question of going back.

It would be too undignified for them to have him in view once broken. The Bishop's clever son, with a first at Cambridge, who sang like an angel as a boy, couldn't just sweep leaves around a graveyard. Maurice Moore saw that; they'd all look idiotic if he stayed.

The father had the establishment on his side, while he, in the end, stood alone. Perhaps a doctor's wayward son might hope for prayer to be used to win him back; the clergyman went all out with medicine. Maurice was drugged out of his once good mind and the finer working of himself, then sent where the church had suitable contacts.

In our town no questions were asked; if Maurice Moore was something of a simpleton he showed his worth with steady labour.

In a land full of those who left some other world behind, you had to look ahead. Maurice Moore forgot. His brother said he had been open hearted. With us he lived in a thickened, dense mass, where his heart's blood congealed. He was obviously a damaged man, yet no one seemed uncomfortable: he was taken in, and given a part to dig.

He moved awkwardly and spoke in a boomed out monotone.

We grew beside this tall, thick presence of a man.

He had no contrasts and no changes, his hardened skin was monochrome.

He moved slowly, as if one solid piece, a pawn pushed across the board.

We took for granted seeing him dig. He was also on the stage, where he spoke his few lines in loud speech and moved his ungainly frame.

He wanted a role and the town gently laughed.

Maurice Moore and I sometimes met behind the curtain, which gave me the right to sit by his ditch, though not in the graveyard, where young ladies, he said, did not belong, and the dead deserved more respect than gawkers while their final bed was prepared.

Maurice Moore showed how I belonged, as he did not, even though I also felt alone amidst family. Without his precarious place at the edge, perhaps I'd not have seen my different place in that community, where you could be attached through church or pub, to repertory or bowls. I dreamt of exile from the only town I knew. In my dream, mother was in the front row of the Big Top, where she'd reserved my seat. She was expansive with good cheer as she called me to join in the limelight beside her. At the exit of this tent, the biggest ever seen, everywhere you looked outside was pitch dark, with no sign of other life. And there was she, queen of the town, with the front reserved for her entourage, including me. But the clown on stage was Maurice Moore, his painted face white and sad. He showed the tragedy of himself, which usually was hidden, and how they clapped! I stood in paralysis – unable to join him and bear the shrieked laughter. I could not sit in the waiting seat but would not risk being mocked. I must go, but where? Nowhere I could see.

To be beside her, in bright light, or all alone in the dark, wasn't much of a choice.

I stayed at the circus exit, pulling away from a lonely man and pulling back from mother's certainties, scared to go it all alone.

VII

Maurice Moore lived outside his father's house and church, far from his homeland, class and education, to play the fool for us.

He had no wish to disturb again and was a warning, he claimed: never begin a rebellion, unless you could see it through. They really get you if you fail. He worried to see me flaunting convention. Perhaps he saw I had bravado without sustaining courage.

VIII

Our ditch digger, once a natural product and born with human skin, had been sent to New Zealand, after transformation.

That he was no longer what he had been seemed to worry no one until I found his brother. He had witnessed Maurice's torment and never forgot.

In our town we could not see what had been done to him, so what was the point in looking? But what if the same was done to us? And what occasioned it? There were no clues anywhere, just Maurice Moore sweating over his spade, or walking stiffly onto a stage.

He rarely had much to say but, just occasionally, spoke surprisingly freely.

We were to stride ahead for progress. Pioneers had to look forward, through seasickness, then all that mud, to established houses, with best china sent out from “home”. Manners were also brought along for regular use. Maurice Moore undoubtedly brought his immaculate, old fashioned manners.

With opportunity on their side, children were lucky and told so. Onward and upwards was the intended direction for us, now that the war was over. “Get a degree, the world is your oyster” was rattled off and half believed, but Maurice Moore had a good degree from Cambridge. I believed him, even if others cracked up at my credulity.

Then, at last, it seemed they would have to see their mistake. Amazingly, he had agreed to attend, and there he was in the photo of an Oxbridge reunion in Wellington: Maurice Moore, with a degree from Cambridge. There could be no doubt. How others adjusted to this fact, I still have no idea, but it was effortlessly accomplished.

No one saw any need to apologise to me for the teasing. I presume they didn’t say sorry to him for insisting that his having been to Cambridge was an absurd figment of his imagination. I had assumed the truth of his past potentially shocking. But, like a rock thrown into a pool, it made a brief ripple, then lay out of sight. Having decreed him ‘harmless’ long ago, they had taken away any strength Maurice Moore might have to shake their sense of themselves.

IX

He could be packaged to us, a detonated bomb that would only go off once. The church got him a job and place to live.

He sent me one letter. It came when, at fourteen, I played a woman on stage for the first time. It was a big cream envelope and inside it paper to match. I had received barely any letters. I could not quickly take in his words before mother took them from me and read the quaintly formal and old fashioned prose to her friend. “Where on earth did he get such language?” They still chose not to recognise him as the well educated son of a Bishop.

I let her take the letter and knew it was betrayal. Then concern took another, more sinister, turn. The letter had been written in archaic words yet was delicate, and that from such a graceless man. He wrote of metamorphosis from child to young womanhood. He spoke of what I knew, through the fuchsia outside the bedroom window, which opened, imperceptibly,

until petals revealed that sexuality had been within. He marked my emergence and they made it smutty. I could not go back, with dirty knees, to sit swinging legs in a ditch. It wasn't just because mother no longer saw him as innocuous. It was not just because, having been acknowledged as a woman, I couldn't hang around his equally revealed manhood.

There was another dream, this one in the local theatre. I was centre stage, while he hovered in shadow, just off. My performance having pleased, I stood to bow before approval. It occurred to me to dart to the wings and bring him front stage on my arm, but I could not move! I might have to marry him. How else did a young woman align herself with a man?

X

Raphael Moore's tales were of a broken brother, not permitted to remain at the vicarage.

His father became a Bishop, Maurice's unruly interlude didn't get in the way of that.

Never-the-less, his parents rid themselves of any sign Maurice ever existed.

The younger Raphael gathered documents, drawings, bits of hospital diary, photos, certificates, programmes of plays he'd acted in, as well as old school reports, but Maurice Moore never wanted any of this collection.

XI

Maurice Moore told me that the living can turn to stone. "You can die a little, or a lot, if you can't live," he said. "How?" I wanted to ask. But stones no longer know.

Raphael remembered his brother and was pleased to speak. His eyesight was going but he fondly showed photos of a beautiful and golden boy. "He was a pale child," Raphael said, putting small black and white photos before me. At 13 his face is turned to the camera and serious.

How did the tall, solemn and still lovely youth become the Maurice I had watched? No one looking at his pubescent face would say complacently of him, "just a bit slow" or "thick". A fine intelligence shows. And the eyes are alert, looking straight at you, as Maurice Moore did not; his eyes had a dead fish film on them.

If few fulfil early promising, Maurice was an extreme. That he was once good looking and clever seems indisputable, although school reports record complaints that he asked too many questions.

In his last year at school, Maurice's art teacher also recorded annoyance. The boy showed more interest in his failure to find his own style with paint than in presenting the required display pieces, although he clearly had talent. Maurice drew the tree outside their bedroom in different lights and from different angles. Sketches piled on the floor were impressive but he failed to capture anything worth having in paint, or so he insisted. "Why should I not admit how hard it is?" he said.

Despite a lively mind, Maurice had one complete blank. As children, they dined with their father only once a week, for Sunday lunch. The boys were questioned on the morning service. Maurice, invariably, forgot the collect, the bible reading and all his father's wise words from the pulpit. Since he was beaten, if he couldn't remember, Raphael reminded him on the walk back from church and again as they went down to lunch after washing. It made no difference. The sabbath beating became a ritual. Raphael disliked being petted for his good memory and couldn't understand why his elder brother never remembered, or why their father couldn't let his performance drop.

XII

When the Bishop died, Raphael helped his frail mother sort papers. The only hint of Maurice was a letter addressed to their father, from some New Zealand priest.

Dear Reverend Moore,

Of course the lost sheep may come to our fold. God will be with him. You are right to have fatherly concern that he might be lonely at first, but reassure yourself his good friend Jesus Christ will travel at his side and the Church here will watch over him. Suitable employment has been found and he will be entirely self-supporting. We can only pray for his return to a life with God, from which he has strayed, causing such distress to your good self.

My thoughts and prayers are with you at this time.

Yours in Christ,

Clifford L Dobbs, Rev.

Raphael had only two of his brother's letters. Others now lost included those written in terror when, arriving in New Zealand, Maurice seemed not to realise he was out of medical scrutiny and methods. Fearing what might still be done to him, in the name of healing, he believed his life depended on proving he was untroubled. Raphael showed me scraps of hospital diary.

The climax began immediately after Maurice's finals at Cambridge, when he returned home, barely able to speak and having not slept for several nights. He did not say, and none of the family knew, that his best friend had killed himself a week earlier. Raphael woke one night, to hear howled shouts. Seeing his brother's bed empty, he ran to where Maurice was pounding the church door, yelling his wrath at God. Before Raphael could persuade him away, their father appeared from the vicarage.

Next morning, Maurice, still distraught, shouted his outrage that his young friend was refused burial in the churchyard. Reverend Moore, expecting his son to pray quietly and submit to the greater wisdom of the established church, refused to argue. He hated scenes and raised voices made him ill, he said. He retreated to his study.

Perhaps this refusal to engage drove Maurice to a frenzy. In unprecedented drama, he burst in on his father. Maurice wanted a memorial service for all who'd known his friend, after the miserable family-only burial in unconsecrated soil.

Reverend Moore refused to conduct any service and Maurice, set to fight, was seen kicking and kicking at the stone church till he broke three of his toes.

Reverend Moore summoned a locksmith, then bolted himself in his study.

Maurice and his father fought one final round, Raphael recalled. "Father, in his flowing robes and dignity, conducted his usual service. The church was his stage and he played piety to perfection. As he went, with due solemnity, to the pulpit, Maurice, who had seemed in a trance beside me, sat up alert and started twitching. Father spoke of the wisdom of God which we, mere mortals, could not understand. It may have been intended as a gesture to Maurice, but it inflamed him. He leapt up.

You couldn't but admire him!

The churchwardens scuttled up the aisle and hovered, nervous and indecisive, either side of him. Why didn't he see the powers that might be mobilised against him?

Father could be extraordinary in public. He bowed his head and prayed. While the wardens took firm hold of Maurice, father moved, slowly and grandly, from the pulpit to the high altar where he knelt as if in deep submission. Even Maurice made no move to chase him there! Only after the wardens got him out the side door did father break his long silence. In hushed, but resonant tones, still on his knees and still with his back to the congregation, he called for God

Almighty's guidance in dealing with a deeply troubled soul. If God could forgive everything, including his son's crucifixion death, we must find forgiveness in our hearts.

"It was pure theatre. Father, of course, never forgave Maurice. His hopes of being a Bishop seemed in danger quite apart from the intolerable assault on his dignity. He was merely a prudent fellow, able to calculate a cost and convince himself his actions were in the interests of God and never just himself."

XIII

Maurice never returned to his father's home, or church. Within an hour of that unseemly Sunday outburst, he was whisked away.

By the time Raphael visited the institution, against parental wishes, his brother was heavily drugged and his state of mind beyond recognition. "It was horrendous," Raphael recalled. "He rocked on his bed reduced to a fearful wreck. I couldn't bear that his pride had gone. He begged and pleaded for me to convince 'them' he was fully recovered. He was concerned he'd left a trail, which they would comb for evidence to hold against him. I was to cover his tracks. He rocked and rocked on that narrow institution bed hitting himself and his head. He gave me scraps of paper to take away in case "they" found them.

How to escape electricity? Stealing early breakfast – hand down the throat – vomit down hospital clothes – tricks they outwit – solitary confinement – close observation. Taught defeat. Handed over for total submission to obliterating drugs and shocks. Walls the only witness. Neutral in uniform they come – with a joke at my reluctance. They know what is good for the broken remains. They catch flesh, which cannot vanish – just their duty, ignore abject fear. Processing the broken according to rules.

Hide – leave vacated bones for them to break – not at home when they come.

Next visit, Maurice was already reduced to looking like a chronic madman. His eyes seemed not to see me. 'I must exist, I must exist,' he chanted as he hit himself. 'Take my soul,' he hissed, 'and keep it safe. Here I can't manage to hide it.' Then he pulled on my hands, pleading I never repeat what he'd just said. Suddenly, he shouted that I might be in league with 'them' and tricking him into trust. He was in terror of his treatment. I tried to take him away for the day

but the doctors were shocked. There was no question of it. 'He attacked a vicar and threatened his life,' the ward sister told me. I was there I said and he had been passionate, not violent, but she didn't listen.

"Father remained implacable to his death that Maurice's name not be mentioned.

Mother's view I could never comprehend. He was her favourite as a child, but his late adolescent religious doubts she could not tolerate.

She referred to him as 'wicked', yet they called in medicine to deal with him.

Neither parent mentioned Maurice in their will. I sent him a share of the estate, but mail returned unopened.

Many who broke the ranks of decorum ended in the colonies and holy families maintained high standards. But they couldn't just exile him, insisting he not return. They handed him to psychiatry first, and he was broken."

XIV

Through a contact, Maurice was sent to a remote South Island sheep station. He detested sheep and the roughness of the few men he met came as a shock. Never-the-less, for over a year, Maurice lived in too much fear to risk moving. It was an old one-time gold digger, with no teeth, who took Maurice north with him. Raphael had only one subsequent letter, sent from the small town where Maurice remained till his death.

On a lucid day, whilst still in England, Maurice explained to Raphael the nightmare of the hospital, where you couldn't quite locate authority. Doctors spoke kindly, and nurses were spies. They also ran the punishment though its existence was denied: treatment was for the patients' good. "I have no existence for them, other than how they've already described me," Maurice said. "I try to not exist, how else can I bear it? I am moved as a pawn in this hospital system."

You never knew how you'd hold up under persecution, and he'd proven a failure.

On other visits Maurice rocked ceaselessly on his bed, saying he was no longer a person, so who did Raphael think he was visiting?

He could become ferocious. "Don't think for a moment you're speaking to me," he shouted, "how can you be? I'm only bits, not a person!"

Several of Maurice's diary entries began to make sense to Raphael.

Flesh severed from bones – a brittle skeleton broken – pieces on four walls. Fragmented trunks and legs looking from grey-white ceiling. Who will keep looking once there is no-one to find? After detonation no way back.

“Burnt out” – a puppet reconstruction. They are pleased with it – legs walk, arms move, even in a “burnt out” frame.

Who bothers to change the mind of a thing – “a new life”, but it’s only broken bits they send away – living as a creature, not as a man.

“He laughed wildly as we discussed his banishment, “I’m glad they’re still afraid of me and don’t see how I’m fully wrecked. Perhaps they think I’ll wander in the cathedral grounds, with trousers half down, like the old ones here. It’s more dignified to go far away and labour.” When the brothers last met, Maurice wasn’t laughing. “Remember, I lived in anguish, unable to tolerate my friend having put that bullet through his handsome head. I needed him. We came to rely on each other. His death was unendurable and all they could do was to blast me out of struggling. They blasted too much of me.”

His last words to Raphael were “I leave music to you, now I am untuned.”

XV

When Maurice Moore saw me pushing against convention he said, “Beware! Unless you have full courage, they’ll get you in the end! Beware belief in feeling sure you’ll get away with it! ” That was our last conversation. Then the letter came, written in an unrecognised, large and spidery hand.

The script inside was formal and old fashioned. It was hard to know what to make of being seen as a thorough young lady, one whose childhood had unfolded, while he watched with pride.

He did not write one indecent word. He wrote of my flowering graciously, to reveal the young woman of the girl he’d watched. He’d followed the budding with interest, having no child of his own. He didn’t say he fancied me, but Mother immediately began to phone.

His cover, of “harmless”, seemed betrayed through me.

Mothers rang other mothers. What if this man was not thoroughly neutered as supposed? He’d lost his wits not his penis!

This drew attention to me as sexual too, and I squirmed.

“You’re getting past sitting in ditches, hanging round a grown man!”

I kept the distance enjoined upon me, and never replied to his words.

That they assumed his interest sexual pointed at me as well as him.

How could they suspect in that way? He was odd and old: I would not be linked, to be a clown with him!

He didn’t once treat me with anything less than more respect than other adults accorded girls.

He spoke as if I was serious. He once apologised for being too burnt out to answer a question.

“Don’t lose the fine tuning of your mind,” he also said. A fool believed in me.

But when it came to it, once I had anything to lose, I behaved like all the rest.

When I returned, Maurice Moore the gravedigger was in his final bed. Someone else must have dug it for him.

Could I bear to see more of what happened to him, only to face how little I could do? There was no way to redeem it. All I could offer was a bouquet for his grave.

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Written 1995, edited 2011
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