

DIFRAXITY
REFLECT. REFRACT. THINK AGAIN.

Him

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Difraxity

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Him

Who would have thought the word *him* could fill you with such terrifying dread?

It is only three letters. One syllable. Hardly worth noticing, really. People say it all the time.

“Ask *him*.”

“Tell *him*.”

“Give it to *him*.”

Nothing to it.

Except, for me, there was everything to it.

Let me tell you why. There was a time when I could write songs about love quite freely, provided the person being loved was vague enough not to cause trouble. I could write about eyes, loneliness, rain on windows, people leaving, people coming back, hearts being broken, hearts being mended. All the usual stuff. But the loved person had to remain safely blurred. A *you* was safest. A *someone* was better still. A *baby* was possible, though I never really liked *baby*. I came from a family where nobody called anyone *baby*, unless there was an actual *baby* involved, and even then not always.

But *him*.

That was different.

Him had weight.

Him had direction.

Him pointed.

And once a word starts pointing, you are in trouble.

This was the early eighties. 1982, perhaps 1983. I was born in 1964, which made me eighteen or nineteen. Old enough to work. Old enough to drink, or at least to drink with confidence. Old enough to ache with love. Old enough to know desire in the body before I had any safe language for it.

But not, in the eyes of the law, old enough to have sex with another man.

People talk about the past as if it was only old songs, bad haircuts and wallpaper that should never have been manufactured. But the past was also law. It was the state. It was the police. It was shame with paperwork. Sex between men had been partially decriminalised in England and Wales, yes, but only if both men were twenty-one or over and only if it happened in private. I was not twenty-one. I was not private either, not really. I lived in a small house in a small village in Lancashire, where walls were thin, curtains twitched, and everybody seemed to know everybody else's business before they knew it themselves.

So when I say I was frightened, I do not only mean emotionally frightened.

I mean properly frightened.

Frightened in the body.

Frightened in the law.

Frightened in the village.

Frightened at home.

Frightened of a word.

I grew up in a place where life was measured in short distances. Home. Work. Pub. Bus stop. Chippy. A few roads I knew well

enough to ride half-asleep on my motorbike. My world was not mapped by possibility. It was mapped by where I could get to, who might see me, and what could never be said.

I did not know many gay people.

That is not quite true.

I did not know any gay people.

That is also not quite true, though I did not know it then. I must have known some. Statistically, I was unlikely to be the only one. But silence does strange things to numbers. If nobody says the word, nobody exists.

I met Daniel when I got a job at a roadside restaurant on the edge of town.

This was not, I should say, the sort of place where one expected destiny to turn up. Destiny, in books, tends to arrive at railway stations, country houses, Parisian cafés, or in a sudden storm. Mine arrived wearing kitchen whites, standing next to a griddle, smelling faintly of cooking oil and disinfectant.

Daniel already worked there.

I was the new one.

He was tall, over six foot, and slim. At the time, I did not know that tall and slim was my type. I did not know I had a type. I barely knew I was allowed to have one. I simply knew there were certain men I noticed more than other men, and that noticing them made life more complicated.

At first, I thought Daniel was an arrogant twat.

This was partly because he was confident and partly because I was not. Confidence, when you do not possess it yourself, can look very much like arrogance. He moved around the kitchen as if he knew

where everything was, because he did. He knew which drawer stuck, which fryer took longer to heat, which waitress forgot orders, and which manager was best avoided before ten in the morning.

I, on the other hand, was chaos.

We each had a griddle and a fat fryer. That was the arrangement. His section was spotless. Mine looked as though a small animal had exploded in batter. I was already known as the messiest chef in the place, though Daniel did not yet know this. He found out quickly enough.

He would look across at my side and say, “You’re messy, you.”

Not cruelly. Just as a statement of fact.

Then he would help me clean it.

That was the first thing I liked about him, I think. Not the height. Not the slimness. Not the face, though obviously the face did not hurt. It was the way he noticed something wrong and quietly put it right. He did not make a performance of being kind. He just was.

Within a few weeks, I was gone.

Completely gone.

Fallen.

Sunk.

Finished.

I would not have called it love at the time. Love was for proper people. Love was for boys and girls in pubs, or engaged couples in the local paper, or women in songs waiting by telephones. Love had a shape, and the shape was not this.

So I called it friendship.

Friendship was safer.

Friendship did not get you arrested.

Friendship did not shame your mother.

Friendship did not make neighbours lower their voices.

Friendship did not contain the word *him*.

We started spending time together outside work. Daniel had recently split up with a local girl, so he had more time on his hands. This, to me, felt like a private miracle. He also drove and did not drink, which made him almost saintly, though in fairness saints do not usually drive young gay men to pubs and drink pints of Coke while the young gay men drink Stella and pretend they are coping.

We went to local pubs. We played pool. We talked about music.

We both liked music, but not the same music, which is often how men say they have nothing in common while continuing to spend every available hour together.

I wrote songs. I had always written songs. While some of my friends were out chasing girls, I was in my bedroom with my synth and amp, writing about love as if I understood it. Which, in some ways, I did. I understood longing. I understood wanting. I understood imagining conversations that would never happen. What I did not understand was how to put any of that into a life.

Daniel was not a fan of my songs. He did not say this cruelly. He just did not like them. I admired that in him as well, though I could have done with a little more dishonesty.

My life became very simple.

I was either working with Daniel, going out with Daniel, thinking about Daniel, or wanking about Daniel.

That was the timetable.

No need for a diary.

I had no intention of telling him how I felt. Not because I was noble. I was not noble. I was terrified. Also, I knew he was straight. I knew this with the certainty of youth, which is to say I knew very little and mistook it for evidence.

My evidence was limited but persuasive. He had had girlfriends. He talked about women. He did not look at me in the way I looked at him. And, most importantly, in my mind I was the only gay man in Lancashire.

Not the whole of Lancashire, perhaps.

I was not ambitious.

Just my part of it. My village. My pubs. My roads. My work. My family. My five-mile world.

There were no posters. No out men. No rainbow flags. No language I could use without fear. There were jokes, obviously. There were always jokes. Queers, poofs, shirt-lifters, benders. Words thrown about so casually they almost passed for weather. You learnt quickly where you stood, or rather where you must never be seen standing.

So there was no point telling Daniel.

What would I have said?

“Daniel, I know we work together frying scampi, but I believe you may be the central organising principle of my emotional life.”

It would not have gone well.

He would have stopped seeing me. That was what I believed. Perhaps I was right. Perhaps I was not. But the risk was impossible. Better to have him near me and silent than lose him entirely because I had said the wrong thing out loud.

And I was happy.

That is the part people sometimes miss about unrequited love. It is not only pain. Sometimes it is joy with a knife hidden inside it. I was happy because I could see him. I could sit opposite him in a pub. I could watch him line up a pool shot. I could listen to him talk. I could make him laugh sometimes, and when I did, the whole evening felt successful.

He did not love me.

But he chose me, in small ordinary ways.

At that age, small ordinary ways can feel enormous.

Then he got a girlfriend.

Her name was Danielle.

I mean, really.

Daniel and Danielle.

If the universe wanted to hurt me, it might have shown a little more imagination.

There they were, like a matching set. The sort of couple name people would say with a smile, as if fate had been involved rather than spite.

I expected everything to change, but it did not change as much as I feared. He still came out with me. He still spent time with me. In some ways, she seemed like the outsider, which gave me a mean little satisfaction I am not proud of but will not pretend I did not feel.

I watched them together and felt sick with jealousy.

Not dramatic jealousy. Not the sort where you throw a glass at a wall. I had neither the courage nor the money to waste glasses. It

was quieter than that. It sat under the ribs. I hated the ease of them. The rightness of them, in other people's eyes. She could touch him. She could kiss him. She could say his name in a way I could not. She could want him openly and nobody would consider it a problem.

She was very sexual, and I dreaded the thought of him having sex with her.

This is not a generous thing to admit, but desire is not generous. Desire is greedy and badly mannered. It wants what it wants, even when what it wants is impossible.

At the time, I thought I was a virgin, at least where women were concerned. I was confused about sex in the way people are confused when nobody has given them the right words. It was only years later that I realised I had not been a virgin at all. There had been encounters at school with other boys. Quite a few, really. But because nobody called them sex, or because we could not bear to call them sex, they somehow did not count.

I remember one older lad in particular. Afterwards, without a trace of irony, he looked at me and said, "Are you a poof?"

I answered far too quickly.

"No. Why? Are you?"

He looked almost angry.

"No!"

And that was that.

I do not think either of us could have described what had happened and connected it to an identity. Not at that age. Not in that place. We had done something we could not name. We could accuse each

other of being something, but neither of us could bear the possibility that the word might also belong to us.

Things that are not named still live a strange life.

They happen.

Then they disappear.

Daniel and Danielle split up within a few months, with very little drama, and Daniel and I continued as before. I do not remember him being devastated. I was relieved, which is also not generous, but there we are.

One night, we went on what might have been a double date. Or perhaps Daniel had a date and I had been supplied with the friend, like an accessory. There were four of us. We went to the pub, got drunk, played pool, laughed. Even Daniel had a drink, which was rare enough to make the evening feel unstable.

Afterwards, we went back to one of the girls' houses. Her parents were away, which in those days was practically a formal invitation to make bad decisions.

Daniel went upstairs with one girl.

I stayed downstairs with Lisa.

Lisa was nice. I liked her. Eventually, we had sex.

And it was nice.

This surprised me. She seemed to enjoy it, which surprised me more. Afterwards, I remember feeling oddly proud, as though I had passed some exam nobody had officially entered me for. I had had sex with a woman. Perhaps this meant I was not abnormal. Perhaps I could be normal after all. Perhaps I could become the sort of man who did the correct things in the correct order and did not frighten himself with pronouns.

But even while I was with Lisa, part of me was upstairs.

With him.

Always him.

I could not stop thinking about what Daniel was doing. I imagined it and hated imagining it. I wanted not to care. I cared completely.

The next morning, we all behaved as if nothing had happened. That was another surprise. Sex had occurred and the world had not ended. People made tea. People found shoes. People went home.

I had expected more ceremony.

Not long after that, Daniel told me he was leaving the area altogether.

He had applied for a promotion and got it. He was moving to Wales.

Wales.

It might as well have been Australia.

You have to understand the size of my world then. I did not think in terms of motorways and visiting and keeping in touch. I thought in terms of what I could reach. Home. Work. Pub. A few streets. A few roads. The bus stop. My motorbike. My life was not wide. It was local, and Daniel had become the centre of it.

So when he said Wales, what I heard was gone.

He kept talking. I could see his mouth moving. There were probably details. Where he would be working. When he would start. What the job involved. I heard none of it.

Except two weeks.

He was leaving in two weeks.

I looked at him and nodded, because that is what men did. Men nodded. Men said things like “nice one” and “good luck” and “you’ll be all right there”. Men did not say, “Please do not remove the only structure holding me together.”

So I nodded.

For the next two weeks, we carried on as normal. That was the cruelty of it. Nothing changed, except everything was ending. We worked together. We went out. We talked. I watched him more closely, trying to store him up. His hands. His shoulders. His laugh. The way he stood. The way he wiped down his side of the kitchen properly while mine continued to look like evidence.

I wanted time to slow down.

It did not.

On his last day, I walked him to the bus stop.

There was no grand farewell. Of course there wasn’t. Grand farewells require both parties to know something is ending. Daniel knew he was leaving a job. I knew I was losing the great love of my life, though I had never been invited to call it that.

We stood there making small talk.

Small talk is never smaller than when it is being used to cover a scream.

I bit the inside of my cheeks to stop myself crying. I could feel the tears waiting. They were lined up behind my eyes, ready to disgrace me.

I wanted to say something.

I wanted to tell him that he had made me happy. That he had made my life bearable. That I woke up wanting the day to start because he might be in it. That I loved him with an intensity that frightened

me. That I knew he did not love me back and that I was not asking him to, not really, but could he please, somehow, understand the size of what he had been?

But there was no language for that.

Not at a bus stop.

Not between working-class lads.

Not in a Lancashire village in the early eighties.

Apparently, the law deemed that I needed protecting. Funny, that. Danielle didn't need protecting. Lisa didn't need protecting. But apparently I did.

Not from harm, exactly. From myself. From the word. From *him*.

The bus arrived.

Daniel said, "OK. I'll be in touch."

I said, "OK. Good luck."

That was the whole farewell.

No hug.

No kiss.

No handshake.

We had never touched. Not properly. Not once. We had stood near each other in the kitchen. Passed plates. Handed over cloths. Sat across tables. Brushed past each other perhaps, accidentally, in narrow spaces. But nothing that could be called contact. Nothing that could be remembered as proof.

He got on the bus.

Paid the driver.

Sat down.

The bus pulled away.

And there it was.

The end of the world, leaving on public transport.

I waved.

Then I broke.

I sobbed. Not prettily. Not like people cry in films, with one tear and good lighting. I cried like a child. Tears, snot, breath catching, the whole humiliating business. I did not care who saw. Something had been torn out of me and there was no way to make it dignified.

I walked back to my motorbike and rode home crying. How I survived the journey is a mystery. I could barely see. I must have been steering through memory.

When I got home, I went to bed.

I cried for him.

Though of course I would not have said *him*.

Not yet.

The next morning, I went back to work. The same kitchen. The same griddle. The same fryer. The same smell of fat and toast and cheap coffee. But Daniel was not there, and his absence was everywhere.

His side was clean.

Mine was not.

I grilled burgers. I fried sausages, scampi and chips. I said almost nothing. People must have thought I was tired or sulking or ill. Perhaps I was all three. Nobody asked the right question, and I would not have answered if they had.

After work, I went home and into my bedroom.

My synth and amp had not been touched for months. Happiness had silenced me. Now grief switched everything back on.

A tune came first. A terrible, sad tune. The sort of tune that does not ask permission before entering the room. I played four chords: A, G, D and E. I did not know about major and minor keys. I still do not, not properly. But I knew sadness when I heard it.

Then the words came.

It's time that you told
Of those memories of old
Of those feelings you shared
When no one's there to talk to you

I sang quietly at first.

The house was small. Too small for secrets. I lived there with my mum and dad, my brother and my sister. The walls were thin. The neighbours heard things. We heard them. They heard us. Privacy was something rich people had in films.

Still, I carried on.

You tried to let him know
That you loved with all your love
But never found the words
To let him know.

And there it was.

Him.

I had sung it.

Not *her*.

Not *you*.

Not *someone*.

Him.

The word seemed to hang in the bedroom like evidence.

I stopped singing.

I listened.

Had anyone heard?

There was no shout from downstairs. No sudden silence through the wall. No family member bursting in to accuse me of accuracy.

So I sang it again.

Quieter.

And now it's over, and there's no one

You still don't let him know

No, please don't go

Please don't go

The terror of it was physical. I could feel it in my throat, my chest, my stomach. That tiny word had become dangerous. It had taken everything I had hidden and placed it in the open.

Not fully open. Not to other people. Not yet.

But open to me.

That was bad enough.

Because once you have said a true thing, even quietly, even in a bedroom, even into a cheap microphone connected to a synth and an amp nobody has asked to hear, it becomes harder to unsay it.

I thought: if they find out, I will kill myself.

That thought was not dramatic to me then. It was practical. A solution. A trapdoor. I could not imagine a life beyond discovery. I could not imagine telling my family, my friends, the people at work. I could not imagine being known.

I could imagine dying.

That was easier.

So I sat there, frightened by a word.

Him.

The smallest confession.

The largest betrayal.

Not of Daniel. He had done nothing wrong. He had been kind to me. He had been my friend. He had no idea that his leaving had destroyed me.

No, the betrayal was of the version of myself I had been performing for everyone else. The lad who drank Stella. The lad who went to the pub. The lad who could sleep with Lisa and think perhaps he had been cured. The lad who could make jokes and fry sausages and ride a motorbike and be, if not normal, then normal enough to pass in poor lighting.

Him betrayed all that.

Him told the truth.

Years later, when I read this story back, I almost do not recognise the voice. Not because it is false, but because it is so young. So frightened. So certain that love must be hidden if it is to survive. So grateful for crumbs. So devastated by ordinary departures.

I want to reach into the page and shake him.

Not Daniel.

Me.

I want to say, “You poor daft sod. It is love. That’s all. Painful, yes. Badly timed, certainly. Directed at the wrong man, almost definitely. But still love. You are not the only gay man in the world. You are not even the only gay man in Lancashire, though admittedly the others are keeping quiet as well. You will survive this. You will have other loves. Some will be worse, actually, so brace yourself. But you will also laugh. You will write. You will sing the word *him* and nobody will die.”

But of course, he could not know that.

He only knew the bedroom.

The thin walls.

The song.

The grief.

The law.

The village.

The word.

No, please don’t go.

Please don’t go.

And perhaps that is why I remember Daniel with such tenderness. Not because he was the great love of my life, though at the time I believed he was. Not because he secretly loved me back. He didn’t. Not because anything happened.

Nothing happened.

That was the whole point.

I remember him because he was the first man who made the word *him* unavoidable.

Before Daniel, I could hide in vagueness.

After Daniel, the word had a face.

Tall. Slim. Tidy. Clean side of the griddle. Pint of Coke. Pool cue in hand. A bus pulling away.

Him.

Who would have thought one word could do so much damage?

Who would have thought one word could save you?

About the Author

John E. Goldring is a writer, songwriter and academic whose work explores love, identity, memory and the complicated business of being human.

Drawing on personal experience, social history and a distinctly irreverent sense of humour, his writing moves between tenderness, uncomfortable truths and the absurdities of everyday life.

Him is part of a developing collection of short stories published through Difraxity.

About Difraxity

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