The Comb-Over



John E. Goldring

DIFRACTITY
REFLECT. REFRACT. THINK AGAIN.

The Comb-Over

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Difraxity

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The Comb-Over

When I got there, there was a bloke waiting for me.

That was the first thing I noticed.

Not where I was. Not how I'd got there. Not whether I was expected, late, early, or in completely the wrong place.

No, the first thing I noticed was him.

Sat on a bench like he'd been waiting ages and had already decided it was my fault.

And the funny thing was, I knew him.

Or thought I did.

You know that feeling when someone's face is familiar, but not from anywhere useful? Not work. Not the pub. Not one of those parties where you spent six hours telling everybody you were only staying for one drink, then woke up the next morning with someone else's scarf and no memory of how you got home.

It was more than that.

It was like I should know him.

Horrible word, should.

Always has been.

When people use the word should, they think they're being helpful. They're not. They're passing mortal judgement on your very existence.

You should have done this.

You should have said that.

You should have left earlier.

You should know better.

Well, I very rarely knew better. That was part of my charm.

And whenever someone was brave enough to use that word with me, I usually told them they should fuck right off.

A bit of a conversation killer, admittedly.

And, in hindsight, not the best way to interact with managers.

But if I could have got there by nine, I would have got there by nine. Them standing there telling me I should be at my desk at nine was not going to make the bus run any faster, was it?

Anyway.

He looked like someone I should know.

Which annoyed me immediately.

So I looked at him, and he looked at me.

Not warmly.

Not coldly either.

More like he was trying to decide whether I was worth the effort of disliking.

“I know you,” I said.

Half statement. Half question. Half fishing expedition. And yes, I know that’s three halves, but I was not in the mood for maths.

He didn’t answer.

Just sat there with this face on him. A quizzical gaze, you might call it, if you were being kind. If you weren’t being kind, you’d call it contempt with a pension.

Now, I've never been shy. You can't be shy when you're me. Or you can, I suppose, but then you're just standing there being flamboyant in silence, and that helps no one.

So I pointed at the space beside him and said, "Hutch up a bit, love."

He moved along the bench.

Not much.

Just enough to make a point.

I sat down.

It was a nice bench, actually. Very tasteful. No plaque on it, which I thought was poor. I've always liked a plaque. Even if you don't know the person, you can still have a little read and make a judgement.

"How long have you been here, honey?" I asked.

He turned towards me slowly, as if I'd asked something stupid and he was deciding whether I deserved an answer.

I waited.

That's not like me, by the way. Waiting. I'm not built for it. Silence and I have never been friends. Silence makes me want to decorate it. Add curtains. Put cushions on it. Say something unforgivable just to give the room a pulse.

But I had only just arrived, and I was trying to behave.

Eventually, he said, "You don't remember me, then?"

Well.

There it was.

The accusation.

Not loud. Not dramatic. Worse than that.

Quiet.

I felt myself blush somewhere deep inside. Not on the face, obviously. I had standards. You can be ashamed without advertising it.

So I did what I always did when cornered.

I turned it into theatre.

“Why, love,” I said, “should I?”

His face changed.

Not much, but enough.

That little tightening round the mouth. That flicker in the eyes.

I’d hit something.

And then he said, “Of course you fucking should remember me.”

Now, I don’t mind language. I’ve always thought a well-placed fuck can lift a sentence the way a brooch lifts a plain cardigan. But this was not decorative swearing.

This was structural.

This man meant it.

“Oops,” I said. “Looks like I’ve hit a nerve, honey. Sorry. What are you called? If you do know me, you’ll also know I’m rubbish with names.”

He didn’t take the bait.

That annoyed me.

I don’t mind someone being angry, but I do expect them to join in properly.

He just said, “I’ll wait until the penny drops.”

So I racked my brain.

And honestly, I tried. I really did.

I went through everyone.

Old neighbours.

Friends of friends.

Men from bars.

Men from before bars.

Men from after bars.

Men I'd kissed.

Men I'd avoided kissing.

Men I'd pretended not to recognise in Tesco because they'd once told me they were "basically spiritual".

Nothing.

No name.

No place.

No neat little drawer in my head where he belonged.

But there was something.

Not a memory exactly.

More an emotional bruise.

The sort you press before you know why it hurts.

He turned away from me then, which I thought was rude.

And that's when I noticed the hair.

Now, before you judge me, I was vulnerable. Disorientated. Not entirely sure where I was or what the rules were. So yes, perhaps I should not have focused on the man's hair.

But you would have looked too.

Because he had plenty of it.

Just not all where nature had originally intended.

Large sections of his head had clearly been negotiated with. There was a whole engineering project going on up there. Hair had been persuaded from one postcode to another and expected to lie still.

From the front, fine.

From the side, ambitious.

From above, tragic.

And I've never been one for thinking before speaking. That's not a criticism. That's evidence.

So I lifted my hand — gently, I might add — and moved a little bit of hair aside.

There it was.

A bald patch.

Not huge. Not terminal.

But present.

Very much in attendance.

"You hide this well, honey," I said. "Do you get it done proper, or do you do it yourself?"

Well.

The man slapped my hand.

Actually slapped it.

And I thought, right, here we go. I may be somewhere unfamiliar, but I'm not taking violence from a badly thatched stranger on a bench.

“Ere, love,” I said. “Don’t be slapping my hand. I’ve only tried to be nice to you, while you’ve been sat there like Princess Margaret with indigestion.”

He turned on me.

“Don’t touch my hair, you vile cow. I always knew he was too good for you. Thank you for confirming it.”

And there it was.

A crack in the wall.

He.

Not they.

Not someone.

Not people.

He.

Specific.

Personal.

Loaded.

But I didn’t know where to put it yet.

The thing about me is, when I’m angry, I don’t rant. Not usually. I mean, I can. I’ve done some wonderful ranting in my time. Standing ovation stuff. But when someone really gets under my skin, I go quiet first.

Then I cut.

So I looked at him.

At the hair.

At the fury.

At the little tremble in his mouth he probably thought he was hiding.

And I said, “Love, if bitterness grew hair, you’d have no problem at all.”

He stared at me.

There was a pause.

A beautiful pause.

The kind of pause where a sentence enters a person slowly, takes its coat off, and starts rearranging the furniture.

Then he went red.

Proper red.

“I came here,” he said, and there was spit in his voice now, “to see if I could help you settle in, and all you’ve done is cut me down.”

I opened my mouth.

He put his hand up.

“I haven’t finished, Ian.”

And that stopped me.

Because he said my name.

Not love.

Not you.

Not vile cow.

Ian.

And suddenly the whole thing shifted.

He knew me.

Really knew me.

Or knew of me.

There's a difference, but sometimes it cuts the same.

"I will show you around," he said, "but then you're on your own."

Now, I could have escalated. Of course I could. I've escalated arguments in launderettes, restaurants, hospital waiting rooms, and once in a branch of WHSmith because a woman tutted at me near the greetings cards.

But this time I didn't.

For once in my life, I kept my mouth shut.

For about twelve seconds.

Then I said, "So who the fuck are you, then?"

He looked at me.

Not angry this time.

Not entirely.

There was something else there.

Something tired.

Something old.

Something that had been waiting too long to be seen.

He took a breath.

"I'm Tim," he said.

I felt the name move through me before my brain caught up.

Tim.

Dave's Tim.

He'd been dead years.

And there it was.

The photograph on Dave's mantelpiece.

Tim in bad flares, standing in front of wallpaper so ugly it looked like it had been designed during a bad trip. Hair swept carefully across his head, smiling as if the whole arrangement made perfect sense.

I had seen that photograph every day when I first moved in with Dave.

Every bloody day.

Well, the wallpaper had to go.

Not the photograph. I wasn't a monster. Not all the time.

But the wallpaper, the curtains, the carpet, the whole sad little museum of a house. Dave had done nothing with the place since Tim died. Nothing that mattered anyway. He had kept it all exactly as it was, as if moving a vase or painting a wall might be a second betrayal.

At the time, I had thought it was ridiculous.

Later, I understood.

Or thought I did.

You never fully understand another person's grief. You just learn where not to put your feet.

I had been with Dave for years. Proper years. Shared bills, hospital appointments, holidays that were never as relaxing as promised, arguments over nothing, quiet Sundays, the lot.

We had even got civilly partnered.

That still made me smile.

Not because it had been romantic in the way people imagine. It had mostly involved paperwork, one sulking witness, and Dave getting emotional in the wrong part of the ceremony. But it had mattered. Of course it had. It had said something out loud that both of us already knew.

I had earned my place in Dave's life.

But Tim had never lost his.

That was the bit I had taken far too long to understand.

And suddenly I knew why the man on the bench had looked familiar but not known.

I had never met Tim.

Not in life.

I had only known him through photographs, stories, and all the spaces Dave had been too heartbroken to change.

A name Dave said carefully.

A house that had waited years for someone else to open the windows.

A life Dave had carried forward without ever quite putting the old one down.

I looked at him again.

Properly this time.

Not just the hair.

At him.

Tim.

Dave's Tim.

The first one.

The one before me.

The one I had been jealous of before I had the decency to be ashamed of it.

I smiled then.

A proper smile this time.

“Tim, love,” I said. “At fucking last.”

He looked at me for a moment.

Then his mouth twitched.

“Don’t start,” he said. “You’re already getting on my nerves.”

I laughed.

And that seemed to settle something between us.

Not everything.

Not yet.

You don’t fix that much history with one laugh and a decent pause.

But something loosened.

Something shifted.

Enough for now.

Tim stood up first and brushed himself down, as if heaven had dust.

“Well,” he said. “Are you coming or not?”

“Where?”

“To the bar.”

Well, the mention of a bar did more for me than all the emotional growth that had just taken place.

“There’s a bar?” I said, my voice rising a little too excitedly.

He gave me a look.

“Of course there’s a bar.”

I stood up.

For a second we just looked at each other.

Two men who had loved the same man.

Two men who had lived in different parts of Dave’s heart and had somehow ended up on the same bench.

Then Tim held out his arm.

I looked at it.

“Well?” he said.

I linked mine through his.

“So,” I said, as we started walking, “what’s it like up here?”

Tim shrugged.

“Quite nice really.”

“Is it?”

“Nowt flashy.”

“I don’t mind a bit of flashy.”

“I know,” he said. “I’ve heard.”

I gave him a look.

He smiled.

“The company’s nice,” he said. “And the bar’s free.”

I stopped walking.

“The bar’s free?”

“Completely.”

I tightened my arm through his.

“Well, why didn’t you say that in the first place?”

Tim shook his head.

“Come on, you old lush.”

And off we went together, arm in arm, already talking over each other before we’d even reached the door.

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.

The Comb-Over is part of a developing collection of short stories published through Difraxity.

About Difraxity

Virtual Artists. Real Stories.

Difraxity is an independent UK creative studio and imprint. Its literary publications include short fiction.

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