

*Edward Candy*

## *The Girlhood of Edward Candy*

I NEVER IN MY LIFE wanted anything so much as, at nineteen, I wanted a pair of ear-rings in the window of a jewellers' shop by the Bayswater station on the Inner Circle.

They were no more than hoops of fine gold, about an inch across, plain shining circles broken by inset seed pearls. Every morning, except on Saturdays and Sundays, I paused for a moment in my rush to catch the train to make sure they hadn't been stolen in the night; every evening, including Saturdays and Sundays, I had a good long look to satisfy myself that nobody had bought them during the day. Their price was on a tiny tag tied to one of the hoops but it was in code. I didn't know if they cost five pounds or fifty; the one was as much out of my range as the other. I had a grant from the LCC, one hundred pounds a year, and a scholarship from the medical school, forty pounds; but in the first week of the first term the Dean sent for me and explained that the LCC had insisted that if I took the scholarship money they would have to deduct it from my grant, so please would I let somebody else have it? The honour would still be mine. I thought the honour compared poorly with forty pounds in cash, but put a good face on it. I don't suppose I would have dared to buy the ear-rings anyway.

Ena and I lived in a flat on the fourth or fifth floor of a terrace house in one of the squares behind Whiteley's. I haven't forgotten which floor it was, nor am I trying to disguise it: it was one of those houses with a basement nearly all above the ground and a flight of steps up to the front door, which makes it difficult to know where to start counting. Actually it was three houses knocked into one, and there was another floor above ours, with a winding staircase and tiny dormer windows looking out in the direction of Kensington Gardens.

Calling it a flat is doing it more than justice; it was a big, unfurnished room, long and narrow, with a low ceiling, two small windows and a washbasin at one end, a gas fire and ring halfway down the long side opposite the door, and a big walk-in cupboard with a shelf. "Very useful", Mrs Macnamara said, throwing it open when she took us round. "Room for everything you'll ever want." It smelt dark and damp but contained no corpses. The room was twenty-five shillings a week inclusive. Electricity was on the house, gas was metered. We bought an electric fire and a pre-war toaster from a junk-shop in Westbourne Grove and settled down like all the other tenants to rob our landlady.

With so much current passing day and night the fuses on the landing were always blowing. Our room was number twelve, the room next door was number fourteen. There was no room thirteen, but our next-door tenant had all the evil luck he might have expected with the proper sequence. He seemed always to be in bed with his girl when the fuses blew. First there was darkness, sudden and complete. Then the bed-springs which would have been creaking like the pulse of a rusty metallic heart fell silent. Next, a scream of pain or rage, a German scream—the man came from Vienna and this little upset was only one of a long string of misfortunes—sounds of a match striking, his girl's voice (soothing? complaining? Hard to tell, she spoke so softly). The door opened, scuffles and knocks were heard on the landing, Martha upstairs would call down, "Again, is it? I never in all my life—!" Juanita from a long way below, "Mrs Macnamara, the lights have gone off, Mrs Macnamara, this is the third time this week." Ena and I lit candles and went back to Walsh's *Diseases of the Nervous System*. Ten minutes later the lights came on again

and so did the electric fire. Eventually the man from Vienna put a nail across the fuse and there were no more power failures for him or any of us.

LATER AFTER ENA moved out and Joe moved in we became Mrs Macnamara's favourite tenants. This was because we were, after the first week, married. We were the only married couple in the house and shed over it a sort of chaste radiance, a subdued glory of legality. I don't know when it dawned on us that the place was a brothel. I should have realised when a merchant seaman picked me up one night at Bayswater. I was spending a few minutes with my ear-rings after coming home late from an evening lecture and he came up and said, "Can I walk you home?" I liked the idea of an escort: the streets between the station and the square were still dark though the blackout was over, and solitary men seemed to rove around the area. So I said yes, thank you very much, and took his kindly proffered arm and we walked along briskly, talking of this and that, I can't remember what, until we got to my front door where I said goodnight and thank you very much and he turned nasty.

Ena let me in, I was shaking too much to turn the key in the lock. She put her arm round me and we sat on her good strong pre-war camp-bed and I cried and cried, mostly from fear, but also because although I hadn't understood all that he said I'd followed enough to realise that he thought badly of me, believing that I had led him on. But it still didn't occur to me that living just there, just then, even if I didn't look or sound like a tart, meant to the sailor that I ought to have taken him in whether I wanted to or not. I suppose we never in the early days noticed that Juanita answered the telephone in the back passage in her dressing gown at any hour of the day, and that her daughter, thin and dark as her mother, about six or seven, spent a lot of the evening sitting hunched up on the common staircase nursing a doll; when an Irish girl, much younger than we were with twice as much hair as both of us put together bunched on the top of her head, moved in next door to us, the other side from the man from Vienna, and entertained her friends in that tiny room, eight feet by six

perhaps, with only a bed and a dressing chest in it, we were only a bit surprised that fresh from Erin she'd made friends so quickly and with so many, and all men too.

One of her friends came often, in the daytime as well as the evening. He was small like her, but rat-faced, ginger-stubbed, unprepossessing. "Can I come into your room a moment?" he asked, and came in without waiting for an answer. "She's locked herself out", he explained over his shoulder, crossing to our window, which he opened as high up as it would go. "I'll just go round and let her in." Ena, or it may have been Joe by then, we sat paralysed watching him, not looking at each other, because though afterwards we agreed we weren't sure, we thought we had heard the girl in the room not much earlier, the walls were so thin. Though we were four or perhaps five floors up he climbed out and disappeared. She must have left the window open when she went out, we agreed, but I'm not sure that she did, I think she opened it when she saw him making faces through the glass, in case he should smash his way in.

"I think she locked him out", I said years later, in Newcastle or Sheffield or Liverpool.

"We couldn't have stopped him", Joe said, or perhaps it was, you couldn't have stopped him.

"We didn't try to. I don't think I knew what a ponce was, then. Or how he might have treated her. There weren't any screams or anything."

"We'd have heard if there were. When Nicky's girl friend had that room we could hear her crying."

"She was only there two days. It was jolly nice of Mrs Macnamara to let her have it."

"Nicky paid for it. I bet he paid for more than a week. Mrs M. must have known something queer was going on."

What was queer was an abortion; Nicky arrived one evening, looking ill; could he bring his girl, she was two months gone, would we look after her—as medical students we could at least make certain nothing terrible happened, after he'd taken her to this chap in Earls Court he'd been given the address of, an Indian doctor; it ought to be all right surely if a doctor did it? She was a vicar's daughter, extremely clean and neat. She spoke very stiffly in an impossibly refined way

as if between her larynx and the rest of her there was a great gulf fixed. He brought her back from Earls Court in a taxi, and we took her pulse every half hour and gave her a great deal of water to drink while we wondered if we could be struck off the Medical Register even before we got on to it. The next day Nicky took her away and we breathed again.

NICKY WAS SITTING on the stairs a whole year before that when I got home: a tall, well-built young man, well dressed too, by 1945 standards. "I got your address from your editor", he said. "I hope you don't mind. I like your poetry very much."

My heart began to race. Those poems, recently published, were nearly four years old. At twenty I found them embarrassing; worse, they misled other people. An elderly gentleman sent me some of his own and asked where and when we could, as kindred spirits, meet. "You have", he wrote in a small painstaking script, "a refreshingly open approach to erotic experience." "What did you expect?" Ena said, or perhaps it was my editor. "All that talk about giving yourself: somebody was bound to take you up on the offer."

Nicky took me out to dinner. "I ought to tell you", I said, eating mussels for the first time, "that those poems are out of date. I was never like that really, less so now."

Nicky bought me sweet white wine, and we ended the meal with Benedictine. "I have no head", I said, letting my non-existent head slip briefly on to his shoulder as we walked across Kensington Gardens. We sat under a tree. "Can I come back to your place?" "No", I said, "I'm very sorry but I share my room with another girl and even if she weren't there I think I still wouldn't." Having no head, I cried all the way back to Bayswater, partly from shame. I had eaten his meal: I knew what he had paid for it, it was the most expensive restaurant I had ever been to. My editor sometimes took me to a place in Mortimer Street where we ate curry, and my sister once took me to the Café Bleu so that I should recognise homosexuals though it was not clear to me why I needed to be able to. But Nicky had spent three pounds on our

meal, an enormous sum in those days. My ingratitude and the alcohol sickened me. However, when his kinder girl needed an abortion he brought her to me, and released me by that act from a bitter sense of obligation.

I never met the elderly gentleman: I knew what to expect from him; for once, after spending an evening with Ena's parents and some friends in St John's Wood I had gone home with a doctor in his sixties, a refugee like themselves, a Viennese like the man in room fourteen, how like I very soon discovered. His room, where he suggested we might have a cup of coffee and look at his books, since he knew from Ena that I loved old books, was very high and handsome. He sat me down with Dante, illustrated by Doré, and brought me coffee in a tiny gold-rimmed cup, the sweetest richest coffee I'd ever tasted. Then he leaned forward and opened my blouse. "Oh, I'm sorry—no, no, I never thought."

"I am so ashamed", he said, "it is because I am lonely. My wife couldn't come with me, you understand."

I was nineteen but ignorant as girls were then, but still I should make no excuses. What I said, in what I thought was a kind and polite way, was, "My father was a sort of refugee, too. From Poland or Lithuania or somewhere in the 1880s. He was sixty when I was born."

Gerhard smiled at me, doing up my buttons. "Yes, we Eastern Europeans are a lecherous lot. He must be a very old man now."

"He died when I was twelve", I said. Then I thought that that might worry Gerhard and added quickly, "He was seventy-two then, of course."

"Yes, he would have been", Gerhard said. "Can you find your way to the tube station?"

Ena's mother said later, "Did he, I hardly know how to put it—make advances? Because we should have warned you, I was very worried. It has happened before, my younger sister, Ena's aunt . . . and others. . . . I hope . . .?" "He was very kind", I said. "He gave me marvellous coffee."

THAT WAS WORSE, much worse than Nicky, because there was no good reason why not,

no Ena sharing the room, no Joe known even as a friend, let alone as lover or husband; and Gerhard would have been kinder than anyone I'd up to that time known. So I went on feeling badly about him for years, long after I'd come across Nicky's name in the paper as a successful writer of religious tales for children—his father-in-law's influence perhaps?

This shabby dealing haunts me, I find, when bigger sins seem easily enough forgotten. Mrs Macnamara knocked on our door on the evening of our wedding; our honeymoon had to be postponed until the end of term, so we came back from the Paddington Register Office and sandwiches and drinks at my sister's place in Gospel Oak to spend that momentous night where we'd spent several other momentous nights over the last six months, whenever Ena had been on Casualty or Obstetrics or living in at a fever hospital. When Joe opened up she presented us with her wedding gift wrapped in tissue paper, two plaques of plaster of Paris, carved in relief with bunches of fruit and flowers and painted in luscious fairy-tale colours. We thanked her with straight if smiling faces but fell about laughing when she'd gone off downstairs. Into the huge shelf at the top of the cupboard they went, behind the cereal packets and the instant coffee.

Only a few weeks later she knocked at the door again. This time she had two plain-clothes policemen with her. "Mr and Mrs Neville are medical students", she explained to them as they pushed past her. Joe got up, shocked, from the table where sure enough Price's *Practice of Medicine* and sheaves of notes gave some semblance of truth to her amazing lie—for a lie was what it sounded like, almost as much to us as them, though we

knew it was true. Had Joe any proof, they asked, dismissing the textbooks as too easily come by. "They're looking for deserters", Mrs Macnamara told me sotto voce, and aloud, "Show them your marriage lines and your stethoscope, Mr Neville, dear, that'll prove your old landlady isn't a liar as God's my witness." While I rushed for the bit of paper the Registrar had handed us and Joe searched his pockets for his student's identity card we both heard doors opening and shutting softly above, below, beside our room, soft steps on the stairs, Juanita's, Martha's clients softly leaving in a quiet flurry of frustrated longings. If the policemen heard, their faces gave nothing away. They inspected our evidence with solid care, then said good night in muted tones, almost respectful. Mrs Macnamara had tears in her eyes, I swear it, as she squeezed my arm while, out on the landing, they explained to Joe that someone had tipped them off, and would we, if we ever saw anything suspicious . . . ? Yes, we would. But we never did, thinking of better uses for our eyes than doing snooper's work unpaid.

And yet, when we qualified, when we parted for eighteen months to do our house-jobs, when our furniture—"Two rugs", said the inventory from Maples', "worn, torn, soiled and stained"—went into store, we left the plaster plaques on the cupboard shelf. We hadn't forgotten them, we deliberately abandoned the awful things as if their tastelessness made them in any way less fit to bear along with us her kind intent, her blowzy blessing. We haven't forgotten them now. We have done worse, I've no doubt, as who hasn't, earning a living, raising a family, paying taxes—worse we'll certainly have done, I should think, but no shabbier.

GEORGE URBAN

"Have They Really Changed?"

# A Conversation with Altiero Spinelli

Euro-Communism, again

## 1. Can Communists Become Social Democrats?

**G**EOURGE URBAN: *One of the surprises of the last Italian elections was your candidacy for the Chamber of Deputies on the Communist platform. Your decision to run for election in support of Communist policies was received with a mixture of horror and disbelief, not least because you were one of Italy's two Commissioners on the Brussels Commission and a leading European Federalist. Those not familiar with the intricacies of Italian Communist politics had reason to be puzzled. Has the PCI sufficiently changed its attitude to Europe for Altiero Spinelli to embrace it, or has Altiero Spinelli changed his politics because the Italian Communists appeared to be set for victory?*

*In either case, there were questions to be asked, both in respect of your attitude to the Communist Party and of the Party's attitude to the policies you represent. What made you decide to run on the Communist ticket?*

**SPINELLI:** My mandate at the European Commission was about to expire when the elections were announced (it expired at the end of 1976); and, as I was close to 70, I decided to return to Italy and retire from public life. In the meantime, I was keeping a close watch on the Italian situation, and expressed my views in a number of articles and interviews. The brunt of these was that Italy was drifting away from the European Community and that only a coalition of all political forces could stop the drift. I saw that the Communist Party had gone through a certain evolution in its internal policies, and I was persuaded that the Party's offer of a "historical compromise" was both right and feasible. It was right not only from the European point of view, but it was also an essential step toward creating a consensus without which Italy could not overcome its economic crisis or restore the authority of law and orderly government. Without the Communists, I argued, no Italian government could be strong enough to make democracy work. I also observed that the Communist attitude to Europe as displayed in the Council of Europe showed a certain progress towards accepting the idea of European unification.

When the elections were announced, the Communist Party—but also the Christian Democrats—felt that they ought to broaden the bases of their respective parties by obtaining the support of certain independent politicians who understood and were willing to support their programme, without, however, either becoming Party members or identifying themselves in every case with the line of the Party. The Christian Democrats "co-opted" Umberto Agnelli,

EUROPEANS were appalled. ALTIERO SPINELLI, one of the founding fathers of Common Market unity and for many years Italy's High Commissioner in Brussels, was running as an "independent Communist" candidate. He was elected to the Chamber of Deputies in Rome, and became a leading spokesman for "Euro-Communism." Had he forgotten all the lessons he had learned over a long life-time as an ex-Communist and anti-Stalinist? How deep, or thoughtful, or sincere was the Great Defection?

In this long conversation with Signor Spinelli GEORGE URBAN continues the exploration of the problems of "Euro-Communism" which he began in the May 1977 ENCOUNTER with his remarkable and widely-discussed interview with Lombardo Radice, a Central Committee member of the Italian Communist Party and (with Berlinguer and Amendola) one of the theoreticians of "Communism with an Italian Face."

ENZO BETTIZA, who also contributed a "dissenting opinion" to the May ENCOUNTER ("Censorship on the March"), confronting Lombardo Radice's pluralist professions with the facts of old-style monolithic control on the current Italian scene, also offers "another view" in this issue (see: pp. 20-22). Bettiza is a liberal Senator from Milan, and edits together with Indro Montanelli the "Giornale Nuovo", the leading daily newspaper which opposes the prospect of a Euro-Communist Italy.