

## **A Conversation on the Nature of Things**

**By Mike Corbett**

**Highly Commended 2018**

‘I thought I might find you here’ I said.

He looked up from where he was sitting, cross-legged by the fire.

‘If I hung around long enough. Wandered far enough. Or just plain persevered... Had a hunch I’d run into you eventually.’

He motioned for me to join him. A welcome invite. Night was drawing in and the mood of the forest was beginning to change.

‘Well, now you found me. Was there something in particular you wanted to say?’

‘It’s not so much what I wanted to say – as what I wanted to ask you,’ I said.

He threw some brushwood on the fire. It sizzled and popped. Sparks flew up. Like fireflies in the darkness. He looked across at me.

‘You know, people always think there’s more,’ he said. ‘More to tell than there really is.

But I guess we can talk for a while. No harm in that. See where it goes...’

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‘Yep, people always think there’s more,’ he repeated later. ‘Look for more. Maybe it’s a human thing – a need.’

‘Maybe it’s an instinct,’ I suggested. ‘A knowledge deep within.’

‘That might be true,’ he said. ‘It’s just – I’ve been around these woods a long time and I haven’t seen it. Not yet at any rate.’

‘Ok,’ I said. ‘But that’s not reason enough to fall back on some easy “only what’s in front of my nose” alternative.’

‘Agreed,’ he replied. ‘But that’s part of the problem. Folk don’t realise. Don’t appreciate. What’s in front of your nose isn’t something less or insufficient. What’s in front of your nose is something wonderful. Full of... Splendour. Mystery. All the more because it’s routine. Part of the ordinary, everyday.’

‘And that’s the trick,’ he continued. ‘Marvel at it. Appreciate it – for all its flaws and disappointments. Enjoy it. Especially the good times. Days. Moments. Enjoy them as they happen, in the present.’

‘Like a mindfulness kind of thing?’ I offered.

‘Don’t know about that,’ he replied. ‘But it sounds about right!’

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He grew quiet. Deflated. Seemed embarrassed at the passion he displayed earlier. A long time passed before he spoke again. Then it was more of a murmur. More to himself than to me.

‘Blue girl,’ he said. Or something like it. ‘Bluebird’. He was lost in his thoughts.

‘Time’, he said at last, as if revealing the proof to a theorem, ‘is a series of moments. Each with its own still centre.’ Then he bowed his head and sighed.

‘But they have no chronology. They do not flow or join. We string them together. Sure. Like beads. Or pearls. But they remain discrete. Disconnected.’

‘They do not fade. Or decline,’ he continued. ‘Recede into shadow. Maybe. Until we start! Remember. Then they flare again. Glistening. Like dust in a sunbeam.’

‘The Brownian movement of Time,’ I muttered weakly in response.

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‘Anyway,’ he began later, as if picking up from a moment ago. ‘I’m talking far too much. And I don’t like it! Covers a multitude! So, your turn...’

‘What do you mean,’ I say.

‘Tell me something about yourself. How did you end up here for a start?’

‘Well, there’s not a lot to tell, really. Just an ordinary guy – making my way in the world. Trying to support those who depend on me. Avoiding doing harm to others. And helping if I can. Nothing special, that’s for sure.’

‘Seems reasonable. So how did you end up here then?’

‘You know, sometimes I ask myself that same question!’

‘Come on man, you must know! You do know. We all know... Say it!’

‘Because I couldn’t fucking take it anymore,’ I cried. With a sudden passion and insight.

That caught me unawares. It hit me hard. I fell silent.

‘Yeah, that about gets it,’ he said. ‘It’s what happened to us all at some point.’

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The quiet of the night broke on that moment. Washed over it. Pooled. And settled again. Gradually. Restoring the stillness. Piece by piece. Like broken china. Or the reflection of the moon on water.

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‘Back there,’ I said, eventually.

‘Yeah,’ he replied.

‘I didn’t mean to... shout at you like that. Don’t quite know what came over me.’

‘That’s ok,’ he said. ‘Sometimes it just comes out that way.’

‘Thanks,’ I said. ‘No offence.’

‘None taken, my friend. None taken,’ he replied.

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‘You know,’ I said, when enough time had passed to change the subject. ‘You were saying something earlier. About a blue girl. Or a blue bird. What was that? Do you mind me asking?’

‘No I don’t,’ he said. ‘You were honest with me. Only right to return the courtesy.’

‘So?’

‘So, it’s about Love,’ he said simply. ‘It’s about someone I loved.’

And the way he spoke. I felt the significance, the import, of the words for him.

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‘You see, we all have our moments,’ he continued. ‘And, like I said, they keep coming ‘round and around. She was young. Beautiful. We both were – young at least,’ he added, with a rueful smile.

‘She was melancholy. Had a sadness about her that drew me to her all the more...’

I could almost see the moments flare.

‘I remember her eyes. So blue. And flecked. Almost bleached in the sunlight. I could lose myself in them then. Still do...’

‘Wow!’ I said.

‘Yeah, wow!’ he replied. ‘And we were happy together too. For a long time. Until... well, you know.’

‘I know,’ I said.

‘But Love doesn’t just disappear,’ he exclaimed. ‘Ok, it may not be present in the current moment. But it sure as hell was present once. And if it was, it will exist, remain, in some form, forever. As long as those moments are remembered.’

‘That’s my theory, anyway,’ he added – somewhat abashed.

‘Like dust in a sunbeam,’ I suggested.

‘Like dust in a sunbeam,’ he replied.

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‘So, what about you,’ I asked. ‘How long have you been here?’

‘Oh, my goodness,’ he said. ‘I’ve been here for what seems like an eternity. Sometimes, at least.’

‘How do you mean?’

‘Well, other times it feels like I just arrived! Like I just got here. And the place seems new, unknown, unexplored – even though I must have been around every inch of it I don’t know how many times, by now.’

‘What about a way out? Have you found one, come across one, yet?’

‘Not exactly. But I’ve come this close.’

He brought his thumb and index finger together until they were almost touching.

‘So, where is it?’

‘Well, like I say, I haven’t exactly found it yet. But what I do know is... This world turns. And when it does there is a glow above the trees. The intimation of another horizon.

Beyond this place. Beyond this circumference. Try to get a bead on that! And follow it, if you can.'

'That's it? That's all you got?'

'Mmm. Doesn't sound like much when you say it out loud, eh?'

'Yeah!'

'But hey. I'm pretty sure it's out there. And if it is, I'll find it. That's for certain. It's just a matter of time.'

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'But, you know, you got to be ready to move on, too,' he said suddenly. You have to move on. When the time is right.'

'Wh-a-at?' I cried. 'I've just bought into this "cherish the moment" idea. Remember? Appreciate them all – good, bad, indifferent. That's what you said.'

'Sure, I did. And I stand by it. But you got to achieve a balance. The young generally think too much about the future. The old – too much about the past. In the end, life is a collection of moments – much like this forest is a collection of trees. We accumulate a lot!! But you can't take them all around with you all the time. Like a turtle in its shell! And you shouldn't try. So, find that balance. Or you'll be weighed down. Unable to move on...'

'I'm not sure I'm one hundred percent behind this "moving on" development,' I said. 'To be perfectly honest.'

'Well, if it makes you more comfortable – I don't mean moving on in the sense of ignoring or just getting "over" things. No. We must deal with all that happens to us. Good and bad. But moving on is an essential part of who we are, what we are, intended to be.'

‘Oh, God,’ he said. ‘Listen to me. I hate it when I talk too much. And I hate it even more when I start to preach! Guess I haven’t spoken to anyone for so long – it’s all coming out in a torrent.’

‘Hey, don’t worry about it,’ I said. ‘It’s no big deal. After all, I asked you!’

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The darkness was beginning to wane. To graduate at the edges. Though the glow he had mentioned earlier still seemed some way off.

‘Ok. I guess you’ve got one more shot, kid.’

‘How do you mean?’ I said.

‘Well, these things usually come in threes, don’t they? You asked about Time, about Love, so what’s your final request? Your third wish, as it were.’

He smiled at that last bit. Technically, I felt he had raised the question of Love. But I wasn’t going to quibble. I made the most of my opportunity.

‘God, Religion and the Afterlife!’ I cried. Without a moment’s hesitation.

‘Jesus!’ he gasped. ‘You’re not one for small talk, eh?’

‘You said it, man,’ I replied.

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‘Well, we could spend every night we got left in this place talking about God, Religion and the Afterlife,’ he said. ‘And I’m not sure we’d progress our understanding much after all that!’

I must have looked disappointed.

‘But I’ll give it to you in a nutshell,’ he said. ‘The executive summary. ‘Cos, I like your passion and intensity. The first thing you got to get right is that God is not Religion. Religion is a man-made thing. And possibly the single, greatest cause of discord, conflict, suffering and strife we have ever inflicted on each other. Compassion is the key. That is when we can imagine God. When we can be the best that we can be. Beneath the crescent moon of Islam or the cross of Christianity. Compassion is the key.’

He looked like he was beginning to fade. His head drooped as if overcome by sleep.

‘And what about the Afterlife,’ I exclaimed. Alarmed that I might not get to the last item on my list.

‘Mmm.’ He made the sound without looking up or moving his chin. ‘That one we each must find out for ourselves,’ he said. ‘But I will tell you this. In my opinion, if we do everything else right – or to the best of our abilities at least – maybe we don’t really need it as much as we think we do. Maybe it’s not the be all and end all. The only destination. Or validation. Maybe it’s just about life, after all...’

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When I awoke the darkness had lifted altogether. Dissolved. Drifted away. I looked across the clearing. The campfire was a mound of ash. Wisps of smoke were rising from the burnt embers. There was no sign of my erstwhile companion. Not a trace. It was like he had never been there! Leaving without a word or sign would be just like him. Well within his repertoire! It was just that, to be honest, I had spent so long wandering in these woods I sometimes doubted my ability to distinguish dreams – or delusions – from reality.

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I roused myself from slumber. Gathered my belongings – what was left of them. Kicked the cinders out. The world was beginning to turn. Vast gears creaking. Grinding out a grim aubade. And above the trees... The promise of a glow. Pale fire shimmering along a dim horizon. It was time to go. To move on. To walk towards it.