

Song for a Viking

(Think of England 1.5)

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This story was written as part of a donation drive for Nepal after the devastating earthquake earlier this year. If you're reading it and you haven't already, please consider [putting in a few pounds/dollars/currency of choice](#) for people in desperate and ongoing need.

'Song for a Viking' takes place during/just after the events of the last chapter of Think of England and will be of no use at all to anyone who hasn't read that book. It is not a standalone. You will definitely get the most out of it if you remind yourself of Think of England's last chapter before reading.

No, I really meant that. Come back when you're done.

Okay? Let's go.

Daniel looked at what he'd written.

It was one line. It had taken him an hour. He had changed every word except for 'the' at least twice. The paper was thick with scribbles and alterations, but here it was, the fruit of his afternoon's labour. Twelve words.

He put his pen to the page and very carefully crossed the whole thing out.

He walked to the window, clean on the inside but still hard to see through for the soot-smuts and grime, and looked out over his panorama. Low brick walls, blackened with smoke; washing lines and the clutter of housing, all mercifully shadowed by the winter twilight closing in. It was a typical view from the back rooms of shabby, gimcrack, arty Bloomsbury. Archie lived in one of the new serviced flats on Cranbourne Street, up in the West End, and Daniel was quite sure *his* rooms didn't overlook the backs, which was just one more reminder why he had made the right decision.

And one more thought about Archie bloody Curtis.

He put both hands into his hair and tugged, hard. It was one of many childhood habits out of which he'd trained himself a long time ago, but it was that or scream aloud, which would doubtless upset Mrs Barzyk. His landlady had fled eastern Prussia to escape the pogroms, and her nerves had to be protected.

He needed to stop thinking about Archie. They would not meet again; Daniel had made the decision, and was reconciled to the consequences. In the unlikely event that Archie's absurd sense of honour *did* lead the overgrown blockhead to seek him out, Daniel would simply send him packing a second time. It was the only decent thing to do. Or, rather it *would* be the decent thing to do if Archie were to come, which he would not.

Daniel could and would forget him. He had forgotten plenty of men. The problem, the only problem, the insuperable, grating, deafening problem was that he could not put what had happened into words.

Normally he would have gone to one of his clubs, a place for Bohemian poets and artists and those who made a theatrical production out of life, and turned the story into a

dramatic monologue for their entertainment. Daniel da Silva falls in love with a Boy's Own Paper hero! During a week in, my dear, the *countryside!* In the *North!* It would be hilarious in the telling, he would *make* it hilarious, and as he did it would rewrite his memories, turning Archie into just another terribly decent Army type, himself into a languishing, lovelorn queer, the whole thing into a sour, witty joke.

It wouldn't be true, but it would be a form of the truth he could use until it became true in his memory, and once that happened it wouldn't matter any more.

But he couldn't talk about it. His week in the country was still all over the newspapers, thanks to its shocking ending and the recently concluded coroner's hearing, and most of them had photographs of Archie. Fair-haired, firm-jawed, deep-chested, mutilated hand firmly shoved into a pocket in every photograph, because it didn't do for anything to chip away at the perfection of a British officer, did it? Archie Curtis, war hero, explorer's nephew, a picture of English manhood. The newspapers adored him in a way Daniel knew he would loathe, grabbing at his guarded sensitivities with inky fingers.

Daniel had not been called to give evidence at the inquest, thanks to Sir Maurice Vaizey, but he had been mentioned by name, and plenty of people knew he'd been at Peakholme. He'd been very popular in the last few days as friends and acquaintances sought the juicy—which was to say *so* shocking, *so* tragic—details of the Armstrongs' deaths, and tried not to look terribly disappointed when told he had left before the murder and suicide.

And thus he couldn't talk. Even to mention falling in love with a golden lad—*again, you never learn, do you?*—even to present it as unrequited adoration for a resolutely unqueer man, would be risk someone linking his name to Archie's. He could not do that.

But if he didn't cough this mass of thorns out of his chest somehow, it would lodge there forever.

He could talk to his father, perhaps. Bruno da Silva would not rebuke, or disapprove, or offer advice. He never did. He would probably listen in silence, and then produce a new patent lock and teach Daniel to pick it, and that might even help.

He couldn't tell his mother about it. He *could* go and have a raging argument with her about something entirely trivial, and that might help too, if he could muster the strength.

Or he could write a poem, which was, after all, what he did, when he wasn't having his time wasted by Sir Maurice Vaizey and the demands of the Private Bureau. That was what he ought to do: write. But he couldn't do that either, because the poem he wanted to write was not the one on the sheet on his desk.

It was all Archie's fault. He kept getting in the way.

Daniel's memories of that appalling limestone cave back at Peakholme were confused fragments, overlaid with exhaustion, fear and the nauseous sense of weight from being underground. And all those remembered images were nagging at his mind like pieces of a puzzle that had to be slid around until, sooner or later, the edges fit together. The flickering light of lanterns, casting weird shadows on the weird walls. Wet, bulbous growths of rock. Archie, the bright-haired barbarian, laughing in battle...

He could *feel* his thoughts slipping into the cadences of Anglo-Saxon. Epithets, alliteration, short rhythmic lines. That was how to write Archie, English officer and Viking berserker. Not in the style of the modern Fragmentalist poetry in which Daniel had made a barely-noticed name for himself, but as an ancient lament for a lost warrior, written with the desperate loneliness that rang through the era's verse and echoed down the centuries.

"You are a sentimental fool, da Silva," he said aloud. "And you are *not* going to write an elegy for Archie sodding Curtis. That song is sundered."

The man easily sunders that which was never joined: our song together. The line, from an Anglo-Saxon lament for parted lovers, had been in his head for days now. And the worst of it was that the man who had torn apart their song before it began was Daniel himself.

They had had one single night, those glorious few hours when Archie had trusted him with his scars and called Daniel's poems beautiful. He'd kissed him, and, being Archie, he'd done it with single-minded purpose, forging forward without thought to anything in his path.

Daniel could still feel it all. Archie's big hands on him, moving with such care. The scar tissue under his own fingertips—gnarled and ugly, and the awful absence of three fingers, but it was *Archie*, and the look in those blue eyes when Daniel had gripped his mutilated hand had been all that mattered. The absurdly endearing concentration Archie had

applied to him, so that Daniel had almost expected him to stick out his tongue like a child faced with a slate of mathematical problems.

He'd found better uses for his tongue, of course. That had undone Daniel more than anything else because he'd had an inkling what it meant even before Archie had confirmed it. Of course he'd never sucked another man off in his life: he was a Curtis, an officer, a gentleman, a thoughtless insensitive oaf of the kind any self-respecting decadent poet would despise.

But he'd taken Daniel in his mouth, insisted on it, with hopeless inexperience and absolute determination, and Daniel had felt his fiercely guarded heart crack like an egg held in Archie's clumsy, powerful grip.

It had been the best night of Daniel's life, on the heels of the worst, and the next day he'd ended the whole business because he could not repay Archie any other way.

And because he had a little bit of sense remaining. Archie was an unthinking, uncomplicated, overgrown schoolboy with no capacity for reflection and a laughably simplistic moral outlook. He had killed two men in front of Daniel's eyes, one with his bare hands, and that itself should be sufficiently repellent to a lifelong pacifist. He was hopelessly mired in convention, and Daniel really did not have the time or the energy to deal with a Young Man's Awakening of the Soul and then be left behind when his lover decided that inversion wasn't worth the effort.

He had done the right thing. There was no question of it.

And if he needed proof, it would come when he never saw Archie again. The man was probably congratulating himself even now on a narrow escape from a lifetime of absinthe and sodomy, or if he wasn't, he soon would be. Daniel had spared them both a great deal of difficulty and embarrassment, that was all.

He put his hands in his hair again, shut his eyes, and tugged. It was quite remarkable how a pain in the scalp could distract one from pain elsewhere.

"All right," he said. Talking to oneself was a poor characteristic in a secret agent, especially one who relied on sneaking and secrecy, but speech was Daniel's rod and his staff.

“I shall write a bloody poem for that *bloody* man, and perhaps then I may be freed of this incubus and get back to work, hmm?”

And it would be in the Anglo-Saxon style: unrhymed, alliterative, paired lines. He lit the gas against the winter evening and went back to his desk, letting the images run through his mind instead of stamping them out. There would be three parts to it: a fight in a cave, a song in a stone ruin, and a parting. And yes, it would be an elegy to Archie Curtis, a lament of love and loss, and it would hurt like hell to write, in the raw, humiliating way that all the work that mattered did. But he would write it, and then put it in a drawer or burn it as a sacrifice to—something, and the whole business would be done with at last.

The fighter in flickering light—no, flickering fires. Flame’s flicker. Or, d words. Deadly in the fire’s dance...

His pen scratched. He wrote. And nineteen lines in, with the words flowing for the first time in days, some utter swine knocked at his door.

“For buggery’s *sake!*” Daniel said aloud, and got up with an angry shove of the chair to send the unwelcome visitor packing.

An hour later, Archie was lying on Daniel’s chaise longue, and Daniel was lying on Archie.

“This is a damned useful thing,” Archie observed.

“What is?”

“This what-d’you-call-it.” He slapped the chaise longue’s side. “The way it only has one end, so a fellow can stretch his legs. I thought they were just for, oh, grand ladies and artistic types.”

“I *am* an artistic type,” Daniel pointed out.

“Well, yes, but...” Archie floundered. “I meant, I thought they were just for show. To look Bohemian for its own sake, you see. Blasted uncomfortable things without backs.”

“Whereas now you realise they are perfectly designed to accommodate large men for fucking, it all makes sense?”

“Well, yes.” Archie frowned. He was evidently considering some other owner of a chaise longue in a new light. Daniel cherished a gleeful hope it was an elderly relative. “Uh. Anyway. Er, Daniel...”

Daniel looked down at him. “Yes?”

An hour ago, Archie had walked into the room and all over Daniel’s objections, carrying his hopes and fears with a determination made all the stronger by his obvious uncertainty as to how they would be received. Daniel had been prepared for reproaches, or for argument; he had been utterly defenceless against the unstoppable tide of Archie’s honesty, smashing Daniel’s palisades to matchwood.

Of course, it was rather difficult to defend oneself when one didn’t actually want to.

He’d given in to everything, agreed that they would see one another, even acquiesced to the insane proposition that he should work with Archie, since it seemed they hadn’t made enough of a pig’s ear of things to date, and then gone to his knees, as though in physical demonstration of his hopeless capitulation. He’d sucked Archie off, sending him stumbling back over the chaise longue, since the sordid little room was barely big enough for the few pieces of cheap furniture it contained, and finished him off like that, and crawled over him because he needed that big warm body close again...

And now Archie was looking nervous, and all at once Daniel was terrified.

“Er, yes.” Archie’s expression was undeniably shifty, on a face made for openness. Daniel felt his chest clench. *Please not this, not after coming here, not again.* “I, uh. Look, Daniel, I dare say you’ll think I’m an utter fool—”

“Can you doubt it?” Daniel said bitingly. *Prepare, prepare.*

“Do stop. You know I’ve very little experience with this sort of thing, of how men conduct...” He waved his hand. The other, Daniel realised, was resting on his own back as

though it was quite natural for them to be touching. He hadn't noticed that, somehow. "Well, I was stuck at Peakholme for days, you know, answering all that agent fellow's questions a dozen times, and kicking my heels for hours on end. Everyone else had gone home, and it rained, so I had to find something to read."

"Read," Daniel repeated.

"Yes. The thing is, there was an unexpurgated Petronius. Translated."

"Was there indeed?" Daniel propped himself up, the better to see Archie's face, in case there might be a clue there. "You amaze me. So do the Armstrongs, actually, I had no idea their tastes were so catholic. I am fascinated, my dear, but slightly bewildered as to why you mention it now."

Archie was going distinctly red. "I suppose you've read it?"

"It's notorious pornography representing the vices of Rome at their most filthy and depraved. Of course I have."

"Well, I hadn't, and I can't say I approve now I have. But..." Archie's arm tightened. "I read the damned thing cover to cover, that's all, because it was what I had to hand. That and *The Fish-pond*. I missed you, and I wanted to, I don't know. Make an effort. And I thought you should know that I did try, and that I intend to keep trying to...to understand, although I must say I don't think I can manage anything along the Roman lines. That's all."

Daniel stared at Archie, fair skin flushed scarlet, laying classical perversions at his feet like a gift, and had to bite his lip.

"I hope you're not laughing," Archie said. "Of course you bloody are. I don't—"

"I'm not," Daniel said, somewhat stifled. "Or if I am it's at myself, but... I'm not. I was writing you a poem." The words tumbled out without his conscious intent. He felt like slapping a hand to his mouth.

Archie's mouth dropped open. "You—Me? May I see?"

"No. I'd only just begun. You interrupted me."

“Well, I’m sorry. No, I’m not. You were writing me a poem.” An incredulous smile was dawning on Archie’s face. “All that fuss you made when I arrived, all that ‘what are you doing here’ stuff, and all the time you were writing a poem? For me?”

“Not ‘for’,” Daniel mumbled, exquisitely embarrassed now.

“*About me?*”

“Loosely inspired. At most. Shut up, Curtis.”

“I will not. You have to show me.”

“I shall do no such thing, you philistine oaf. You can see it when it’s finished.”

“You’re going to write it.” Archie’s expression was something Daniel wanted to hold forever, a kind of baffled awe, as though he’d been given something so precious he couldn’t quite believe it. “I don’t know what to—I *do* know what to say.”

“What?” Daniel enquired, and was caught by the blue sincerity of Archie’s eyes.

“This.” Archie pulled him into a kiss.

His hands were on Daniel’s head, unbalanced in feel by the glove and the missing fingers, holding painfully tight. He kissed hard, giving rather than taking, pushing himself into Daniel, an offering that could not be refused, and when he pulled back there was an almost lost expression in his eyes.

“Archie?”

“I’m jolly glad you let me come in. That’s all. Well, that, and…” Archie sat up, lifting Daniel with him as though he were a featherweight, so that Daniel was left more or less straddling his lap. “We did agree that I needed practice.”

“At what?” Daniel said, and found himself on his back, at the wrong end of the chaise longue. There was a certain amount of fumbling, which ended with Daniel sprawled over the furniture and Archie kneeling between his legs, hands moving very lightly to his hips. “Oh, that. So we did.”

“I rather thought Petronius might be of some use with this sort of thing,” Archie said, eyes intent on his work. “You know. How one should go about the business.”

“I can lend you all sorts of helpful literature—” Daniel broke off with a gasp.

“I bet you could,” Archie muttered. “I think I’m more of a practical learner.”

Daniel did not intend to object to that. He shut his eyes, letting his head fall back, and reached for Archie’s thick hair, murmuring encouragement, feeling his muscles spasm as Archie’s mouth closed around his prick. “Yes, like that. Like *that*.” Growing certainty in Archie’s movements now, his lips firm and tight, his good hand exploring very cautiously between Daniel’s legs, the leather glove hot against his thigh, and as Daniel moaned, Archie increased the suction of his mouth. “God! You’re a quick study.”

“Good teacher,” Archie mumbled around him, and took him down, until Daniel had both hands fisted tight in his hair, until he could barely stop himself from thrusting upwards, until Archie’s mouth and spit and warmth were the centre of the world and everything else fell away. He groaned a warning, was ignored, made a more urgent noise as his pleasure peaked unstoppably, and felt Archie’s hands close on his hips with startling force. Daniel choked, cried aloud, and came in Archie’s mouth with a sharp and fearful joy.

Archie held on tight until Daniel relaxed in his grip, and only then pulled his mouth away, with a noise suggestive of alarm.

“Spit it out,” Daniel advised. “There’s a mug there.”

Archie rose with some haste, spat, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Curse it. I thought I could do that properly.”

“My dear, you did.” Daniel was half off the chaise longue. He was contemplating whether he had the energy to haul himself back onto it when Archie flopped down onto the floor. Daniel slid down to join him, and found himself very pleasantly draped across a comfortingly solid British officer. “That was delightful. Inspired, even. I am grateful to Petronius.”

Archie grinned down at him. “Worth a poem?”

“A limerick, certainly.”

“A *limerick*?”

“There was a young captain named Archie,” Daniel suggested. “Whose ways were initially starchy. With a few Latin tricks, and a go at some—”

Archie swiped at him. “I wouldn’t finish that if I were you.”

“Spoilsport.” He couldn’t think of an end rhyme anyway. “Are you staying?”

“Tonight? You mean, here? May I?”

“Mrs Barzyk is quite marvellously discreet. Or oblivious. One of the two.”

“Then—yes. God, yes.” Archie grinned at him. It was a wide, idiotic, infectious grin that suggested its wearer couldn’t stop smiling, and Daniel had a feeling that his own expression might be all too similar. “If you’re not too busy writing, of course. I wouldn’t want to distract you.”

Daniel waved a languid hand. “I dare say the Muse will forgive my defection for a night.”

He’d probably have to reconsider the poem’s structure anyway, he thought, as Archie leaned in to kiss him, still wearing that absurd, incredulous smile. Heaven knew what he’d end up writing now, or where this would lead, or what the pair of them would end up doing for the Bureau and for themselves.

It didn’t matter, not now, not with Archie’s mouth on his, hands in his hair. All that mattered in this moment was...well, that he would not be writing an elegy.

Not today.

Thanks for reading, and for donating!

The line Daniel quotes is from the Anglo-Saxon elegy/riddle 'Wulf and Eadwacer', for those interested...

KJ xx

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