

# Autumn on Lange Straat

By Guy Wilson



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dorothydemoore@xs4all.nl

## Overture and beginners

Tap tap tap. The conductor's baton on the music stand causes the orchestra members to stop their tuning exercises and fall silent. The theatre, rich in red velvet, golden pillars, and classically inspired ceiling paintings, is full of expectant theatregoers, warm and safe. The auditorium lights go down. The twilight silence is rich in anticipation. The baton rises and falls, and the first notes of the overture strike out.

By the time the overture is over, the audience will have heard snippets of all the songs that feature in the musical that will follow and the audience is prepared for what is to come. The actors take their places and wait for the curtain to rise.

The first tune in this overture is a lively, noisy, chaotic and clamorous livener to make the audience sit up and pay attention. It's the chaos of a solo adolescence. Without parental or familial guidance, I gained all my social, moral and ethical education from West End and Broadway musical theatre. I claim and own the gay boy cliché of escaping into shows and their tunes. As Dorothy DeMoore says, 'There's a show tune suited to every situation in life.' I sustained myself with the romantic associations of show tunes, although I admit to being more of a 'Hello Dolly' sort than a 'Les Miserable' sort.

The overture segues gently into an anthemic solo tune that I will sing later; I've given myself one of the lead roles. The character will come on soon. He is an older man. At least 70 by now, or dead. He will sing about the ambitions he had, the frustrations, the successes he enjoyed and the freedoms he discovered. The tune sounds familiar; It is a truth rarely acknowledged that a middle-aged English man,

disinterested and diminished by life, could do worse than run away and marry an Amsterdam drag queen.

Every musical has a love song, and the overture now spends some time curling strings and heartfelt brass around something that might sound like *We Kiss in a Shadow* from *The King and I*. We had to hide so much. We speak in a whisper, afraid to be heard. When people are near, we speak not a word. A hint of wedding bells introduces another tuneful snippet in the overture, and there follows a succession of extravagant harmonies that talk of heart-aching, hopeless, impossible romanticism that can only remain aspirational.

The stage lights dim even more. The overture slows. The curtain will go up very soon. Another familiar tune: Nic was dead, to begin with....This must be distinctly understood, or nothing wonderful can come of the story I am going to relate. There follows a musical in three acts. Fifty-six scenes, one for each year of his life, each named with a show tune. There's an index at the back.

The sun still shines  
Although the rain descends  
You have but danced  
To where the rainbow ends  
(*The Truth at Last* by Charles Hawtrey 1924)

Act I

Entr'acte

Human nature can't help being itself.  
(*Jude the Obscure* by Thomas Hardy, 1895)

Scene 1 ● It Happens Very Softly

Nic. His name was Nic. Not Nick. Nic. N.I.C. They were his initials. Nicholas Ian Clews. Nic. A person is never truly dead until we stop saying his name. Nic.

Our relationship began very slowly, like an old-fashioned courtship, except that we first made contact online. It was a sex line, to be honest. There we were, two mid-50s men on a sex chat line talking about everything except sex. Regularly. For three months. I wish I had kept a log of our conversations. Our subject matter was broad and eclectic.

We didn't meet in person until three months later, even though, as we eventually discovered, we lived only 10 minutes walk away. I had assumed he was Dutch, and it wasn't until we met for coffee that I heard his English Midlands accent.

'Were you an actor?' he asked.

'Once an actor, always an actor,' I said.

'Were you in a production of 'Godspell' in the 70s?'

'Yes, but it's not something I boast about.'

'I saw you.'

'No, you can't possibly remember an unknown actor from the middle of an ensemble several decades ago. Besides, I was eighteen then and quite a bit thinner,' I laughed.

'I was fourteen. We were on a school trip. Your costume was striped trousers and a baggy white shirt with rainbow braces.'

Stunned silence.

He was right.

A big red cat wandered casually into the room. 'This is Charlie,' I said. 'Love me, love my pussy.' How to embarrass yourself on a first meeting. What was I thinking?

We had coffee and talked. We said, 'Let's keep in touch.'  
Bye.

When we were alone, Charlie looked at me with that look that said, 'And?'

## Scene 2 • Not While I'm Around

The Naming of Cats is a difficult matter,  
It isn't just one of your holiday games.  
*Old Possum's Book of Practical Cats*  
T. S. Eliot 1939

When I moved into the apartment that would be my first secure home in Amsterdam, I decided that I was never going to have a meaningful relationship and was never going to move out of my precious apartment and that, anyway, it was too small to share with anyone, except maybe a cat.

I had the name before I had the cat. Charlie. I wanted a cat, and I wanted to call him Charlie. I cherish my inner 9-year-old self and my inner 15-year-old self to whom I give full license and who both giggle at farts, risqué euphemisms and double entendres. Charlie was the brand name of an overpowering perfume for women in the 1970s; it was also a euphemism for the vagina. Thus, disliking the perfume and being unfamiliar with vaginas, when a television

comedy character asked, 'Can you smell my Charlie?' my inner boys and I cried with laughter. Age has not diminished the fun we still have with that line. Charlie is also a euphemism for cocaine, of which, by this time, I had become rather fond.

Charlie and I both had a hard start in life and would help each other out of it with admirable courage, fortitude, and honesty. He came from a rescue centre and was so nervous that he spent the daylight hours of the first three weeks at home, hiding behind a bookcase. I sat by the bookcase and talked to him through the gap. He looked lost and vulnerable, but I couldn't persuade him from his secure spot. He was unreachable, physically and mentally. I heard him when he came out to eat and use the litter tray at night.

Eventually, one day, he gingerly stepped out from behind the bookcase, and we stood on opposite sides of the living room and blinked uncertainly at each other. Always being one for the dramatic musical theatre moment, I started singing. *Not While I'm Around* from Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd*. Nothing's going to harm you. Others may desert you, but I'm here. Not to worry. We approached each other, and he let me pick him up. We both relaxed as I continued to sing. I held him to my chest, and he began to purr very gently. That was it. I was in love. I had my companion. I had my responsibility. I had reason to go on. Whenever I picked him up and sang 'Nothing's going to harm you' for the next nineteen years, he purred, and we had a moment.

Charlie and I played a lot together. He had a catnip-filled yellow duck that we called Margaret. He left headless blackbirds on the bed as gifts, so I'd thank him, clear away the mess and keep a feather so that we could play *Chase the Feather Up the Wall*. We recreated famous paintings. I



still have a photograph of our *Creation of Adam* from the Sistine Chapel. Sometimes, we just played *Catch the Cat*, which could only end when he deigned to slow down and let me catch him.

Charlie's eyes expanded into big black saucers when he was excited or in a good mood. His fur trembled and stood up from his body as if he was touching a Van de Graaff generator when his senses were excitedly alert. When utterly content, he had a long, pointed Mohican-style trail down the centre of his back, like the Pennines down the centre of England. He would lie on his back, legs bent, paws relaxed while his eyes teased and dared me to tickle his cappuccino-coloured belly hair. If I moved toward him slowly, he made himself stay there until the last possible second before I made contact with him. Then he'd jump to his feet and run across the room in a second, claws ripping victory out of the furniture or, if we were lucky, on his scratching post.

Charlie and I lived happily in our little cosy flat and were content and peaceful. I was ready to get old. Me and my cat. As it transpired, he would be my live-in companion with whom I stayed the longest. How fortunate that we can never see what else is ahead for us.

### Scene 3 ● Don't Tell Mama

I was a lawbreaker from an early age. Born homosexual, I never questioned my sexuality. It could be said that it was to my advantage that I learned to become a sexually precocious teenager, willing and able to explore sexual adventures. It would be called abuse these days, but I never said no, and every time I had sex between the ages of 14 and 21, I broke the law.

The abuses of children in England in the 1950s and 1960s were standard: the physical, the psychological, and the sexual. There was nothing remarkable about them in the context of the times. The local councillor, the used car dealer, the local menswear shop manager; I thought being used for sex by these men was something that just happened, like having to go to school, something that had to be endured, so I found a way of enjoying it. At least it meant that someone noticed me, which was more than I could ever expect at home. Sex and dance classes were my escape.

Consensual homosexual sex was decriminalised in 1967, but only for two men (no threesomes, then) over 21 in consensual acts in private. Hotels were not private. Various reports were written on the basis of Christian charity, the assumption being that the general population was Christian and that they therefore naturally assumed that everyone knew homosexuality was immoral. Christian charity legitimised us as objects to pity. 'Poor men, they can't have a wife, they can't have children, it's a terrible life.' Aw, cheers. Thank you very much.

Homosexuality, decriminalised or not, was still considered a psychiatric illness that drove some to suicide. Suicide was also illegal. Thus, I grew up in a society where you could be prosecuted for being so mentally ill that you were driven to the depravities of having sex with other men and boys and then being driven by shame to suicide. And if you failed at suicide, you could be doubly prosecuted.

I was profoundly criminal, suicide excepted, until I was 21. Frequently. And not in the slightest ashamed.

## Scene 4 ● Mums and Dads

My childhood was an ordinary English childhood. I was born in the middle of the post-war baby boom in the 1950s into a typical white working-class family, living in ordinary working-class social housing. Work was plentiful; my father was a plumber. My mother was 'just' a housewife who put on a full face of makeup before spending the day shopping, cleaning, and cooking, all of which she hated, and raising children, most of whom she didn't want. Education was not valued. Ambition was restricted to earning enough to keep house and home together. The way things looked was always more important than how things actually were. Hence, the full makeup, just in case someone came to the door.

The pre-fridge, pre-supermarket days meant walking into town for food shopping was a daily task, walking to the butchers, then the bakers and the greengrocers, meeting other similarly made-up housewives. The makeup was sometimes useful for covering up the bruises their husbands had given them the evening before. They chatted on street corners where regular topics of conversation after the weather were 'I'd like to get a job, but he won't let me,' 'I wanted to go dancing on Saturday, but he wouldn't take me.' 'Know your station and stay there' was the philosophy none dared to challenge, even if they had had the imagination to do so.

Children in my family were sexually transmitted diseases. The marriages of my parents and all their siblings were because of pregnancies. Abortion was illegal, dangerous, and even life-threatening, involving, as it did, hot baths, bottles of gin, and knitting needles. 'The right thing' had to

be seen to be done. There were rules and regulations in the conduct of immorality. Marriage was the only cure for pregnancy. Bridal flower bouquets were often large enough to hide a tell-tale bulge that everyone pretended not to notice. Babies were generally born 'early', a phenomenon never talked about. Sex was never discussed, and every pregnancy-induced marriage inevitably failed, leaving damaged children in their wake.

The people who became my parents were barely out of their teens when they had a quick fumbled fuck behind a hotdog stand at the annual local fair and conceived me. My birth was not joyfully anticipated by anyone. My mother described it as 'The most embarrassing night of my life.' I was always held to blame for my own conception. 'If it hadn't been for you, we wouldn't have had to get married.' My mother would tell anyone who cared to listen to the story of her child-bearing years. 'My first child was the reason I had to get married. My second child was the only one born out of love. My third child was born to save the marriage, and she failed. At least her birth was no more trouble than having a good shit.' She never told this story when she was sober, so I heard it often.

My parents fought frequently. As my consciousness and early memories developed, I would never forget him smacking her across the face, flattening her against a wall, kneeling her in the stomach, or dragging her across the kitchen floor by her hair. I was sent back to bed, but I could still hear the yelling and screaming, the slapping and punching and the door slams, and I knew that the best place for me was under a blanket in that cold, dark bedroom. No wonder I had nightmares. Trauma thrives in the dark, but nobody thought about traumas in those post-war scarred days.

My mother took decisive action by finally walking out on us all; we children were 8, 5 and 2 years old when she ran away in the middle of the night with a man she'd known for two weeks. I was sent to live with her the following year as a punishment for my declining behaviour: uncharacteristic disobedience, incontinence, and arson, all behaviours that these days would be recognised as trauma symptoms. 'You're both as bad as each other,' was my father's reasoning. 'You deserve each other.'

There always had to be a guilty party in English divorces, and no one could comprehend how a mother could desert three young children. Therefore, she was branded guilty and carried that guilt for the rest of her life. But then she discovered my homosexuality. Her response has become a classic in my repertory of anecdotes, 'If you're not a fucking queer, then I'm the Queen of fucking Sheba.' The story makes me laugh these days. It sounds so far-fetched, but I think I can be forgiven for feeling, at the time, full of anger and fear. My mother died many years later pickled in brandy and cigarette smoke, agoraphobic, claustrophobic, fearful of thunder, angry, bitter and in a constant state of nervous high alert.

Taboos around sex, indescribable daily frustrations, boredom and imprisonments were pervasive, unseen, unrecognised and quietly poisonous, like a slow gas leak. The taboos and rules begat more rules, which were simultaneously unbreakable and unbearable.

The little queer boy broke all the rules just by being there. And if he knows he breaks all the rules and knows that his parents can't keep to their rules either, and if he has a mind of his own and a sense of danger, he will find a way out. Easier said than done. I know that just as well as anyone else. There was a lot of damage to be done before I was

ready to find my way out, but I wouldn't have had the courage without the damage. I've subsequently re-invented myself several times throughout my life. Old advice: 'If you can't change the world around you, change the world around you.' You might fail. But at least you will have tried. If you don't want to fail, don't change anything. But choosing not to fail is not the same as succeeding. It's your choice.

What happens to children with no protective mother? You never get over being ignored by your parents, no matter how old you get. They say you can't miss what you never had. That's wrong. I miss the hugs I never had from my parents. I miss the words of encouragement I never had. I miss them showing an interest in me and my life, which they never did. I never had any of those things. But miss them? You bet I do. Sometimes, it's still painful, even more so now that they are both long dead and hope is over. I had to find a way of living with these gaping disappointments. It made me needy.

Childhood trauma gave me the courage to put myself in dangerous situations without concern for the consequences. I left school with no plan other than to get away. There was a careers interview with some old bloke in glasses, a tweed jacket and a comb-over whose room was thick with cigarette smoke. 'What do you want to do when you leave?' 'I want to be an actor.' 'Don't be ridiculous.' I was out of there and away from my mother and off to London before I was 16. I packed a small brown cardboard suitcase and got on a train to London. Thirty years later, I packed a somewhat larger suitcase and got on a plane from London to Amsterdam. Subsequently, and eventually, along came the drag queen.

## Scene 5 • There's Gotta Be Something Better Than This

The several coincidences in my and Nic's lives were Dickensian in their implausibility. And, as in Dickens, the significance of the coincidences did not come to light until long after the events, and we were sharing past experiences.

Think about England in the 70s; many of us think of disco. That is one way of looking at the decade. But memories of the 70s in England are also marred by strikes and social unrest, like the Blitz but without the heroism. Miners were on strike, engineers and electrical workers were on strike, which led to the infamous three-day week when London's streets and roads were thrown into darkness, shops and restaurants were unlit and gloomy, television was suspended for several nights a week, and we ate our meagre dinners at home not very romantically by candlelight, as long as we had the luck to find a shop that still had candles available. Striking dustmen meant that putrid rubbish bins were not collected or emptied. Leicester Square, Regents Street and most West End streets were piled high with rubbish, and rats ran everywhere. Children were kept out of school by striking school caretakers, hospital wards were closed by striking health workers, and patients died. In one especially notorious episode, even grave diggers went out on strike.

A new IRA bombing campaign also began when they detonated four car bombs in London. Bombings continued all over London. For the rest of the 70s and beyond, IRA bombings were a regular occurrence.

So we went to secret underground discos and danced. A favourite was the DOK just off Carnaby Street, named after a disco in Amsterdam that I thought was terribly exotic. The

'News of the World', which passed as a newspaper, now happily discontinued, frequently wrote about 'seedy homosexual underworlds.' I was proud that at least I belonged to a recognised tribe, especially one which they described as 'abnormal' and 'perverted'. Much of the scene was indeed seedy, sticky carpets in bars being an abiding memory.

One cold November day, I went on a Gay Liberation Front march through central London to a demonstration in Trafalgar Square. I wore a badge that said, 'I am one of those men your mother warned you about'.

'I was there, too,' said Nic as we reminisced about the 'good old' 70s.

'I was freezing,' I said. 'I had a scarf but didn't have an overcoat.'

'I know,' said Nic. 'I saw you. I opened my coat. It was huge. Army surplus. And you ...'

'...sheltered in the coat and warmed me,' I was aghast. 'Was that you?'

'It seems so,' said Nic. 'How is it possible we both have the same memory?'

'It must have been you,' I said.

Was it just a coincidence? It seemed fanciful to imagine that fate had been trying to throw us together. Who knows. We both remembered the story's details, right down to who spoke from the plinth of Nelson's Column and how the police harassed and intimidated us.



I was under 21 and still illegal then. Nic and I remembered not exchanging phone numbers or agreeing to meet. We didn't get the opportunity. The place was crawling with police. One of them came up behind me, pulled me out from Nic's coat and yanked my scarf so hard around my neck that my face must have gone blue. I kicked her in the shins; the pain made her let go of my scarf, and I ran as fast as I could and jumped onto the open rear platform of the nearest moving bus. I always remembered the tall man with the thick coat who took pity on my coldness and gave me a few minutes of warmth. Thirty years later, I discovered who it was, and so reader, I married him!

Nic and I shared pessimistic views of human nature. We might have grown into full-blown anarchists had we not been too occupied in surviving the rubbish being thrown at us by not only the homophobic British government but by our teachers, our families, and the social codes that told us every day that we were immoral and sinful, to be pitied and made fun of. Maybe we were anarchists up to a point. Can you be an anarchist 'up to a point', or is that like being 'slightly pregnant'? We marched on those early Gay Liberation Front marches; I know what it is like to be spat on in the street. We rallied on Trafalgar Square and argued for liberty and freedom from domination. To that extent, we might have been anarchists.

Eventually, it made sense for Nic and I to leave England separately and, thirty years apart, eventually earn Dutch citizenship and happily surrender our status as British subjects.

Scene 6 ● It's A Well-Known Fact

My curiosity and amusement of England and the English were born out of what once was dislike and

embarrassment. This is so because I used to be English, was born English, and was the almost typical working-class example of post-war, post-empire England. A boomer, if you will. A white working-class male boomer. I was raised to behave accordingly, to know my place, to be heterosexual and not buck the system. And I was not too fond of it from the off. I didn't realise the harm it had done to me until a few years after I left England, and I had time and distance to change my perspective. There must be a syndrome used to label people like me who leave their country of birth and turn against their roots.

The English can sometimes tend to give themselves the right to use their own lives as the median norm and use it to measure and judge everyone else's lives, usually as inferior. I had an aged English aunt who asked me, post Brexit and post-Covid, 'Is there anything I can send you that you can't get there? Things are bad enough here in England, so I can't imagine what it's like abroad where you live.' She was shocked to hear that our supermarket shelves were fully stocked and that our health service was still functional and buoyant, though stretched by the pandemic. I can only write from experience. I once told an English person, 'My experiences of forty years of the British NHS are generally not good. My experiences of twenty years of the Dutch health service have been generally excellent.' To which he replied, 'I find that hard to believe.' It's my experience.

My mother came to visit me in Amsterdam once - just the once. 'I've bought you some goodies,' she said. 'Ooh, lovely,' I said. She rummaged around in her bag like a warped Mary Poppins. The first thing that came out was a bottle of sherry. 'Sherry?' I queried. 'That's for me. My doctor told me to stop drinking a bottle of brandy a day, so now I only drink a bottle of sherry because sherry's not really drinking. I've brought you some tea, coffee, milk, and

sugar.' She placed each treasured item on the kitchen counter as if she were presenting me with the crown jewels. 'Thank you,' I said. 'But why?' Her reply left me breathless. 'In case you can't get them here.' 'In case I can't get tea and coffee in Amsterdam?! We have supermarkets and electric lighting and everything,' I said. 'Well, I didn't know. Anyway...' A change of subject was her favourite tactic for saving face. 'Anyway, have you got your house phone connected yet?' 'No, mother, not yet.' 'Ah. Is it all a bit mañana here?' 'No, mother, that's your Spanish stereotype. The house phone hasn't been connected because I haven't asked the phone company to connect it yet.' We went for a walk down Langestraat, my favourite street in Amsterdam. 'What does Langestraat mean?' she asked. Keep the peace. Just tell her. 'Long Street.' 'Why can't they just say Long Street then?' 'Because it's Dutch and we're in the Netherlands.' 'That's just stupid.' That was one of mother's most effective ways of ending a conversation. 'That's just stupid.' She was so unsettled at being off the small island that she spent most of her visit curled up on the bed in a foetal position with her bottle on the bedside table, miraculously converted from sherry to brandy.

I didn't realise how affected and conditioned I was by the national small-island mentality of the British. How do you define island mentality? The sea is a border, a boundary, and living on an island makes the English scared of the world. And that fear can turn to arrogance and ignorance. Middle England isn't, in my experience, not as liberal as BBC Radio 4 tells them they are.

As children in England, we were taught the well-known, irrefutable facts that England beat the Spanish Armada single-handedly and that England won the Battle of Waterloo single-handedly. It was years before I discovered