

Meeting the Man

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I had been waiting to see Morrissey in concert for six years. I grew up with him; we all did. You couldn't walk into a bar or club in Manchester in the early 90s without hearing that sweet, tender voice emanating from the speakers. Hell, there were times when we thought a riot would break out if the D.J. didn't play the entire *Queen is Dead* album, in sequence of course.

A year ago to the day, I had tickets to see him play at Manchester's Apollo Theatre. I didn't end up seeing him play the gig, but I did get a chance to do what all my friends have always wanted to do—learn a secret the entire world has pondered. It was the day before the concert and I was in town looking for a new pair of shoes when the man himself walked through the front door of the shoe store and started perusing Italian loafers.

Astonishingly, he looked exactly as I imagined he would. His hair was light brown and quiffed at the front. He wore tight, faded jeans that looked cheap but stylish, and a skintight salmon-colored shirt with just one of the six buttons secured, exposing the top of his chest down to his naval. However, there was an air of chaste regality about him.

He moved in my direction and starting eyeballing some lavishly expensive French dress shoes. I was still waiting for the clerk to return with my shoes, so I decided to make a move. I would never have forgiven myself if I hadn't. I walked casually towards him and ideally fingered a fair of Italian loafers.

"Nice fabric," I said to him in as relaxed a manner as I felt able to display.

"Quite striking, yes," he said, looking directly into my eyes. "Are you a fan?" Morrissey asked with a disconcerting blend of contempt and genuine interest.

"I like some of your work, own a couple of albums. If that makes me a fan then I guess I am." I decided it was best to play down my appreciation of the man. He has always struck me in interviews as a man who dislikes

eneration immensely.

“Any that you particularly enjoyed?”

I wasn't sure how best to answer this question. It seemed he was fishing for a compliment, which seemed most unlike him from what I knew. Although, I kept reminding myself that I did not know him at all, and most of what I had heard was probably urban legend.

“The Queen is Dead of course, and Strangeways; in fact, all of The Smith's stuff and . . . well all of your solo work. I was lying before. I am a big fan.” I blushed a little. “Sorry,” I added a little weakly.

Morrissey smiled and patted me on the shoulder. “Don't worry, for as Oscar Wilde once said, ‘A little sincerity is a dangerous thing, and a great deal of it is absolutely fatal.’” Now this was the enigmatic Morrissey I felt I knew and loved.

“May I ask what you are doing here?” I asked him.

“Buying shoes my good man, what else does one do in a shoe shop?” he replied.

I was angry with myself for being so foolish, but resolute in appearing calm and at ease with the situation. “But Steven, you were wearing such marvelous shoes when you came in. You can't possibly be thinking about replacing them.” The Wilde-esque intonation and rare use of his first name was a bold move, even a little presumptuous. But I was behind, and felt I needed to take a chance and win his respect. It never occurred to me during our brief time together to just be myself. In fact, I could not believe I was having this conversation; it was almost more than my nervous system could take. You see Morrissey is more than just a musician, so much more. He is a poet, a leader, an icon, a way of life. I have friends that say they would gladly forego the rest of their existence just to spend five minutes with the man. Ridiculous? Yes, but here's the thing: I believe them! I would not put myself in a league quite that extreme, but I have often wondered what it would be like to have a beer with the great man and pick his brain about life, sex, philosophy, and literature.

That is the difference between me and all the other Morrissey fanatics I know. I don't want to discuss the day he wrote “Bigmouth Strikes Again,” or tell him how much I admire his vegan lifestyle and outspoken nature. I wouldn't even tell him how many gigs I've been to, or how many T-Shirts I own. What I would value, above even the finest Bordeaux wine, is the oppor-

tunity to contemplate life's complexities with him and tap into that eloquent, sardonic humor of his.

"Touché," he said. "You know I have an hour until I have to be at rehearsal. You want to get a drink when we are finished here?"

I wanted to say, "Fuck yes!" but settled for a more standard, socially acceptable response.

"O.K., you get us a booth at that pub across the street, and I will be over as soon as I find an acceptable pair of shoes," he said.

I agreed, left the store, and walked towards to pub never expecting to see him again.

The pub was typically ornate with elegant Victorian decor, tiled murals, and a selection of beers that included that old English classic Tetley's. I ordered myself a pint and perused the menu. I did not intend to buy anything, only outsiders buy food in Manchester pubs.

I was just settling down enjoying the first luxurious sips of lager, when a flustered Morrissey took a seat opposite me in the small booth.

"I need to tell you something. In fact, I am compelled to tell you because I have wanted to tell someone for an era," Morrissey said, passionately.

"O.K." I said, hesitantly.

"It's about my sexuality."

At this point, I should explain the significance of this statement. Morrissey's legendary sensitive, melancholy persona made him an enigma. While he is shrouded in many mysteries, his ambiguous sexuality has been the most fiercely disputed topic of all. On the surface he appears to be the quintessential gay icon: the big hair, the painfully thin physique, the mannerisms, and many of his song lyrics. Despite this evidence the man has never 'outed' himself. The rare times he discusses sexuality at all, he claims to be celibate and proclaims the desire for his music to be accepted by all people regardless of age, sex, gender or sexual preference. Nevertheless, a large part of his mystique, and consequently his success, is tied inexorably to his sexual ambiguity.

Was he about to finally reveal the truth to me? He looked perturbed, so I tried to say something soothing and intelligent. Unfortunately, all I could manage was "ummm."

Morrissey took a deep breath and gave me a level gaze.

"I'm straight," he said, and his head fell forward in an involuntary ges-

ture of shame. “I tried living the lifestyle, but it just wasn’t me. By the time I figured it out for certain, the mystique had already encapsulated my act.”

I let the news decant for a while. This was a surprise. If I had been asked to guess his orientation, straight would have been my last scenario. What was more shocking though, was the fact that he had just told me his life’s secret having known me for no more than about seventeen minutes! As things began to arrange in my head, too much time was passing, and I had to say something, anything.

“So is that when you came up with the whole celibate thing?” I asked. Morrissey nodded gingerly, lifting his head up and directing his gaze back at me. “It’s not like anything else is fake,” he said. “I mean everything I say in the press and all the lyrics are straight from my heart. I just always thought that if everyone knew I was straight, I wouldn’t be accepted the way I am now in this culture.”

“So you have been celibate all these years?”

“Pretty much. Once I achieved my present level of fame there was no going back. I knew that any sexual encounter would likely be leaked to the press.”

“Wow. All those lyrics about not being able to love and being isolated were completely justified,” I said.

He nodded gravely again and looked at his watch, “I have to go,” he said, and reached into the pocket of his flower-covered jacket. “Here you go, front row tickets for tonight. Just . . . please don’t mention this conversation to anyone.”

I took the tickets with gratitude and assured him that his secret was safe. I watched Morrissey leave the pub, took a deep breath, and downed my beer. Overwhelmed by the experience, instead of walking to the arena, I walked to my car and drove straight home.