

I Remember Erewhon

Bradley Stoke



I remember Erewhon. I remember the crenelated turrets, towers and spires overshadowing a city of unheralded bends and unexpected corners and alleyways. I remember the cobbled streets, the gaslit esplanades, the flint-studded churches, the winding river, and the expansive city square. I also remember the soaring modern edifices that truly scraped the sky and which reflected one on another; the multi-lane highways—sometimes slow and congested, occasionally empty and open, and most often dense with speeding sports cars—that radiated outwards in ever-widening rings from the city's hub alongside elegant apartments, decrepit slums, shadowy lanes illuminated by brightly-lit curtained windows, and towards endless rows of suburban streets dotted with bus-stops, corner shops and red post boxes.

And weaving about the city, snaking beside the roads, diving through the tall buildings, above crossroads and emerging from and disappearing into mysterious dark tunnels of promise and dread, were railway lines on which chuffed steam trains and sped electric trains, diesel trains and trains levitated by the magic of magnetism several centimetres above the rails. This spaghetti of railway track transported me and everyone else who chose to board the train past advertisement hoardings, above dark sinister streets, beside monotonous rows of semi-detached and mock-Tudor suburban houses, beneath rivers and through ornate, wooded and open-lawn parkland that were as integral to Erewhon's enchanted appeal as anything on the streets. And it is to the parks—as much as to the shopping malls, the cavernous railways stations, the motorway intersections and the overarching concrete bridges—that my thoughts so often return.

When I was a young boy, racing about with my red toy balloon, blue rucksack

and silver sneakers, it was Erewhon's parks that were most important to me. Only the zoo, the museum and the red-and-yellow fast food outlets offered competition to the attraction of the varied and always spacious parks that were never far from the perambulations of a boy whose greatest source of pleasure was to climb the steps and then descend the metal slope of the park's slides. But roundabouts, swings and see-saws were only a few of the distractions on offer at Erewhon's extensive parkland. There were hedges, paths, fences and fields stretching in every direction: from the imposing gates that threatened to close at some mysterious mythical hour to the bandstands that sometimes presented the latest pop sensation to a remarkably small audience and onwards to statues of commanding and impressive figures of authority of which the most disturbing feature was that none of the men these statues represented, in a sense barely understood at all by me, were any longer living: in fact they were in a state of incomprehensible non-being known as death.

And amongst these statues—some with a noble gaze set to a far distant horizon, some abstract in form and at all times both pregnant with and absent of meaning—there were statues of women startlingly different from real-life women. These statues were of women who were not the pink, brown or black skinned women with handbags, open-toed sandals and a ready supply of tissues that a young boy might otherwise encounter in Erewhon. Nor were they like girls who differed only from boys in that they played with dolls, didn't watch the same cartoons on TV and never tired of reminding you whenever you did something wrong. The women represented by these statues were clearly not real people because they were all marble-white and almost never wore clothes.

This last observation was of little significance to me during my early visits to the city of Erewhon, which in those days was a magical place in which a train ride towards playing fields and swings and zoos and museums was the chief attraction. But as the years went by, these statues that were at first barely glimpsed became increasingly centre-stage. The idea of what a woman might be became steadily more important to me and the mysteriously austere and classical vision of nudity represented by these statues that made them seem so distant and unobtainable became increasingly irrelevant. Instead, a more lurid, fleshly, Technicolor vision had become more prominent. Indeed, everything about women was now something altogether different. There was no longer a divide between those girls that were much the same age as me and therefore inherently uninteresting, and those older than me whose main purpose in life was to provide sweets, medicaments and lunch-boxes. There was a new species of woman that I was becoming aware of and, like everything else that was important to me, this woman also inhabited Erewhon.

Her name was Ydobon. And, of course, she'd always been there in Erewhon: I'd just not noticed her. She was the girl or the woman (probably either and possibly both) I had always glimpsed from the corner of my eye. She was like the naked women statues because she displayed what the other sex might offer, but different from them insofar as her skin was pink, brown or black; her hair was in many colours and shades and styled in many different ways; and she had a way of smiling that unlike the girls and women I'd known before had an impact not between the ears or even in the beating heart but more fundamentally and more significantly below the belt and above the knees.

I don't remember the time when I first spoke to Ydobon. And I don't remember where. It might have been on the sixty-fourth floor of the tall buildings that I so often visited simply to stare at the vertiginous view below. It might have been in the oddly rural crinkly orange wheat fields that interspersed Erewhon's cobbled streets and tarmac highways. It might have been on the ferry that crossed the broad rivers of Erewhon so quickly traversed by underground train but so difficult to cross by other means. And I'm sure that my first remarks were stumbling, boastful and embarrassingly juvenile. I'd probably attempted to interest her in Star Wars paraphernalia. Maybe I'd discussed the intricacies of Premier League Football. Perhaps I thought she'd be as interested as I was in the latest Marvel Superheroes movie. After all, what girl wouldn't be interested in Ironman or the Mighty Thor?

Curiously, Ydobon was always interested in, even fascinated by, me and our early encounters very often climaxed in a warm kiss or a tentative grope that left me with an acrid-smelling damp patch between my legs that disturbed me when I first became aware of it between sheets that otherwise had the odour of conditioner and fart. As time went on, these relatively innocent encounters became more adventurous, but never proceeded far beyond the bounds of my ignorance. There were opportunities for nudity and even an early fumbling between the legs, but these were always short-lived and curtailed by the increasingly frequent release of warm dampness on soft linen that so swiftly became crinkled and stiff.

I would meet Ydobon in so many strange places. At first, they were in my more familiar haunts, such as parks and playgrounds and woodland paths, but with fresh interests came new and seemingly more exciting rendezvous points. These might

be shops in the mall: as often as likely to be a computer games shop or comic book store as a clothes shop or department store (but never, these days, in a toy shop or other such childish venues). Sometimes I was with friends who would mysteriously fade into the background whenever Ydobon came into view. Just as often, we would meet in train compartments, multi-storey car parks, public squares (beside imposing statues of lions, dragons or horses) and all the other places one could meet by chance rather than by design.

Sometimes, Ydobon recognised me. Sometimes it was as if it was for the first time. Sometimes we'd been close friends since time immemorial. Sometimes it was a brief kiss and tell. And Ydobon changed so often. Her hair changed colour and style, as also did, but less frequently, her skin-colour, plumpness and height. Her clothes I barely remember except where they best allowed vantage of an ankle, a knee, a shoulder or even (and this was guaranteed to dampen the sheets) a belly-button or the heave of her bosom.

But it was also I who was changing. My voice first cracked and then deepened. My awareness of details such as a girl's choice of clothes, shoes and hair-style was growing at the same pace as I became conscious of my own choice of shirt, trousers, shoes and jacket. Ydobon became less generic and more concrete. She had a definite twinkle in her eyes. A memorable dimple in her cheeks. A slender wrist and long fingers with bracelets that clattered as she brushed a hand through hair that was brunette or blonde (and no longer merely brown or fair). An ankle that was pleasingly slender and a knee that was impressed on my memory as firmly as if it were impressed on my groin.

And the time came when Ydobon changed no more. Or only by increments. Her hair-colour; her complexion; her small pursed lips; her wide-open eyes; her signature phrases: these remained more or less the same. She was a more constant companion on my frequent visits to Erewhon, whose absence would be a matter for comment. And, bit-by-bit, little-by-little, my focus of attention shifted from her nose to her lips, from her blouse to her bra and then to her breasts, from her knees past the thighs to her crotch, and then, divesting each onion shell of feminine vestment to pure, simple nakedness. And never before (and never since) had sheer nudity been so exciting, so enticing and so desirable.

And I couldn't get enough of it.

It didn't matter where we were in Erewhon. We could be on a busy pavement jostled by hurrying commuters, high above the city streets on the top floor of a tall building or, most often, in an open field of wheat under a blue sky and our skin baking under a yellow sun. But wherever we were, there was nakedness; accompanied often by fumbling and thrusting and, more often than not, premature release.

But these golden days of sunshine and simple sexual craving and satisfaction couldn't last forever. Just when it seemed that my life with Ydobon would stay the same until the end of eternity, all changed. Ydobon became more harshly delineated; she became less compliant and more argumentative; our encounters became as likely to end in conflict and tears as in tender moments of prenuptial bliss: until such a time they were never anything other than occasion for anger and sorrow and regret.

And then Ydobon as had I known her at that time vanished.

But Erewhon didn't vanish with her. It was still there: a city of turrets and

towers and cobbled streets, of highways and byways and railway sidings, of malls and night clubs and coffee shops and pubs. More often than it used to, the weather would change from the constant sunshine of my childhood and my happiest early days with Ydobon to overcast and drizzly and the city became more gritty, neon-lit and sometimes forbiddingly ominous.

It was inevitable that Ydobon would return. But her return was hesitant and sputtering. And her new look was more diverse than it had ever been before. Her lips were pursed or full, with large square teeth bursting forth or a pencil-line of barely glimpsed enamel. Her flesh became sometimes opulent, sometimes emaciated, sometimes dark, sometimes white tinged with blue. Her eyes were set under eyelids that fluttered or barely moved, with irises from blue to brown to a scary black. And her body was sometimes easy to take (perhaps far too much so) or otherwise unobtainable and therefore the more mysterious and desirable. Her bosom rose and fell. Her wrists and the arms to which they belonged swelled and withered. Ydobon was a woman who pursued me in many guises as Erewhon's landscape steadily mutated to provide space for university halls of residence, night clubs and concert halls, cafeterias and pubs. Sometimes she would be glimpsed through the shadows of the night or brightly illuminated by the lights of the night club (only to be obscured as the lights swivelled and their attention swerved elsewhere).

In those days, there was a chaotic fragmentary dissonance associated with Erewhon that spilt over into my encounters with Ydobon. Shapes were brighter and more clearly delineated like a painting by Gustav Klimt or a sculpture by Jeff Koons. Or they were scattered into shards like a Cubist painting. Occasionally, shapes and

sounds were as abstract and unfocussed as a Jackson Pollock or Mark Rothko canvas soundtracked by Peter Brötzman on saxophone and Cecil Taylor on piano. But just as often, the city of Erewhon reasserted itself in strong primary colours that Roy Lichtenstein might favour and accompanied by the bright and bouncy rhythms of Tiësto and David Guetta. And where there was chaos in Erewhon, so too there was in the many and varied apparitions of Ydobon: who somehow managed to move from the Pre-Raphaelite beauty of her earlier years to something more like the subject of an Egon Schiele painting. She was now a woman of flesh and pungent perfume: armpits, crotch and chipped toe-nails. My penetrations into Ydobon were now characterised by sweat and struggle. I might focus on the metal stud through her tongue or the similarly metallic taste of her fillings. I might dive again and again into a pussy that mewed rather than purred. I might renounce the front entrance altogether and sometimes come to regret my decision, even in Erewhon, where the damp warm spot that was once my close friend and companion became sullied with other less pleasurable associations.

However, Erewhon was a city that continued to give. The wide avenues and narrow streets, the towering modern buildings and the ancient mediaeval relics, the railway lines that threaded through tower blocks, tunnels and open fields: they still provided plenty of opportunities for nocturnal secretion.

Ydobon became steadily less mutable and more reliable. Her hair colour became more solidly brunette and had a definite curl to it. Her eyes took on the steady green-brown they've remained ever since. Her skin settled on a slightly olive pink. Her voice became as memorable a part of her as every other feature and in a sense less prone to shift and vary. Compared to the Ydobon I'd once known or the many

versions of her that I'd got to know as I'd frequented the night clubs of Erewhon, she was perhaps less exhilarating. These days, Ydobon was not the kind of girl (or even the kind of woman) who would shriek in triumphant recognition as a tune by the Swedish House Mafia or Avicii stormed across the dance floor and pushed aside all the other contenders for my attention. She wasn't the kind of girl who'd start the evening with a line of coke, follow by a tab of E and finish with a potent mix of skank and whiskey. She wasn't the kind of girl who, even when we met in Erewhon, would tear off her clothes literally in wild abandon, grab my erect penis between her teeth and pummel me into total and absolute submission. She was no longer as intoxicating as strong liquor, as electrifying as a DJ's break or as numbing as a legal high.

But on the other hand, however relatively unexciting Ydobon might now be, however much even in Erewhon she would now no longer let herself loose, she was a steady reliable anchor which moored me to a less chaotic version of Erewhon.

There were fewer streets I chose to roam in the city now. I steered clear of the dark alleyways, the lurid lights of the night club, and the sticky table surfaces of the city pubs. I favoured a different kind of shopping experience in the city's malls. I discovered clothes shops in Erewhon I'd never known existed before. I took more pleasure at sitting by Ydobon on a bench on the station platform where we'd watch the trains go by but most of all talk with the woman who I now recognised more as a wife than as a girlfriend or a brief encounter.

And it was about that time that Erewhon began to fade. I still visit it on occasion, of course, but I am more likely now to visit other places that are less thrilling for a younger man and more suited to someone with children, a mortgage and

a steady but secure job. And the Ydobon I've got to know so well is now no longer a nobody in any sense of the word and no longer to be seen in Erewhon and probably was never meant to even visit. She is more likely to be found in other places that my younger self could never imagine visiting (even in my dreams). These are places that are child-friendly, provide healthy options and may even offer family discounts.

But Erewhon is still there. It is always waiting for me to return should I ever feel the need. And, of course, no one can be sure what the future may bring.

But if I should ever visit Erewhon as often as I once did, the city would be a different place. It would be less magical, less fantastical, more mundane and much more slow-paced. It might be a place for chance encounter as it once used to be. It might be a place for adventure and wonder and exploration. But it would be full of women who (like the ones I meet on my relatively infrequent visits) are older, wiser, less excitable and whose voices are more prominent than their physical features. And Ydobon would now be a very different creature to the Ydobon I once knew. She would be scarred by life's experiences. She would be wise in her ways and understandably wary of chance and fortune.

But as I roll over under the sheets and gaze lovingly at my wife as she breathes softly beside me, I hope that I need never again have to get to know the Erewhon I still remember so well.