

Bill Brandt

A true but fictional first encounter

Bill Jay

You have telephoned Bill Brandt requesting an interview.

His voice is soft, barely above a whisper, and in its slow cadence and precise enunciation you might imagine a European accent (Viennese, perhaps). There is a long pause while he considers your request.

"I do not think so," he says.

You gush about your admiration for his work, that you will only be in London for a short time, how important it is to you that a meeting takes place... Again, a pause. He then tells you when to arrive, "if you must."

In the residential fringe of London you find his address, a building of soot-darkened gray brick, monolithic and austere. It looks like an institution for political deviants in its sinister functionalism; seedy Graham Greeneland.

The stairs are dark and the tiny elevator is a prison cubicle closed with a crash by sliding metal grates. On the landing you peer through the gloom searching for the door numbers. Bulbs are missing from the light sockets.

At last you confront Bill Brandt. He is not what you might have expected. He is tall and gaunt, and looks like an El Greco saint and indeed he is priest-like in his stern withdrawal and ascetic features. He is not hospitable but neither is he hostile. He seems nervous like a thoroughbred racehorse, and you expect him to shy if you come too close or speak too abruptly. There is no small-talk. He sits opposite you and you are separated by a table, bare except for a few retouching implements. But the print on which he has been working has been removed. Hidden.

In the silence you glance around the room. It has the restrained dimness of an

Edwardian interior - dark green walls and deep red drapes held aside by brass clips, solid heavy furniture, shelves of books, a screen containing early (family?) portraits, an old polished mahogany camera and, on the wall, incongruous fish-bone-and-twig collages. You nervously look back at your host and your first thought, perhaps, is the difficulty of imagining this fragile, long-limbed aristocrat, with his aura of somber serenity, colliding with the world of parlor maids, East End pub dwellers and Northern coal-miners.

This interview, you can sense, will be more difficult than you suspected. Where to begin? Why not at the beginning?

"Mr. Brandt," you say (it is inconceivable that anyone could call him plain Bill), "it has been variously reported that you were born in Hamburg, of an English father and German mother. In London of Russian parents, or in Russia of English parents ..."

"Yes," he says. And smiles. You wait, expecting him to elaborate. He is confirming only that his origins have been variously reported.

You try again. "Will you please tell me your background." "No," he whispers, followed by a long pause.

Usually, when an interviewer says nothing the other person will make conversation. Brandt remains calm and silent. It is disconcerting. You are losing whatever control you might have had.

"Why not?," you blurt out in frustration.

He sits there, with his long fingers spread out on the table, pale blue eyes over aquiline nose, gazing out the window at bare winter branches. Eventually, he says: "The person is of no importance. It is the picture that is important ..." His whisper trails away.

You start to disagree; biography, you insist, can increase understanding of the picture. But you are merely making noise, and begin to feel like a raucous intruder, as if shouting in church.

"I thought you wanted to talk about my photographs," he says. "If that is not your reason for being here, perhaps you should leave." Again he diffidently smiles, softening the sharpness of his words.

You sink into yourself and become aware of something that you should have known but which had been drowned in the cacophony of personal needs and wishes. It is this: Bill Brandt does not need anything, least of all from you. He does not need your questions, or your curiosity, or your opinions. Above all, he does not need your approval. Only an old-world courtesy has allowed you this meeting. Only your selfishness prompted this invasion of his privacy. You feel uncouth and rude.

"You are a difficult man to interview, " you tell him. He smiles but says nothing.

"Have you any regrets?"

"No," he says, as adamantly as he can. Then, more gently, after a long pause, "I like to be left alone."

"Perhaps I should leave," you reply, hoping he will contradict you.

"Yes", he says. "Good."

You feel abashed and slightly indignant. Perhaps this sense of unfocused grievance prompts in you a final ill-considered remark.

As Brandt walks you to the door, you pass a room which might be his darkroom. You ask if you might look in. He denies you. "What is it, then, the Holy of Holies?" you blurt

out.

Bill Brandt thinks for a while and then says. "Yes!" and ushers you out. He is not smiling.

Outside the building, the day has also turned gray and brooding, and in the alleys and doorways and facades of suburbia Bill Brandt photographs mock you.

But there is a post script.

If you can swallow your sense of defeat born of pride, you will make another appointment. And then another.

You now know the ground rules and the game board becomes familiar, losing its alien aura. And you discover that, with patience, the silences are pregnant - not barren; that he can be, will be, forthcoming about his photographs if he respects your desire to understand. You begin to understand that in order to learn from Brandt and his work you must approach them with a sensitized but blank mind and, by contrast, you learn how often you approach people and ideas with pre-developed images, rejecting those which do not conform to the already-known.

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