

# Jessie Left

DAVID KENNEDY

**L**ate afternoon winter light entered the room obliquely, striking the seven assembled there as if in some final reckoning. They sat around the oblong table slumped in the padded chairs, exhausted, but strangely poised. No one had spoken since Jesse slammed out.

"I guess we should go on," Paul said. "I believe we were talking about how children mean and how adults mean."

There was still silence. Antonio leaned his dark, soulful head back, and gazed at the ceiling. Yoko, squinting at the table, doodled furiously on her pad.

"And you Luke had just said that there are no neutral meanings for children, that theirs is a much more polarized meaning world . . . Am I getting this right?"

Luke straightened in his chair, took a deep breath, gathering himself. He was about to speak when Esme broke in.

"Excuse me, but I don't see how we can let this go anymore."

"Absolutely," muttered Antonio.

It was as if a wind had entered the room. Faces brightened, but with a harsh light.

"Personally I've had it with Jesse," said Miriam.

"How can you say that?" said Luke. "In this situation, you can't. We need him. He's part of the school community. He's keeps things going."

"Keeps things going?" scoffed Antonio. "This is the third time he's done this. I think we should kick him out."

"I'm not sure we should be talking about him without him here," Paul said.

Miriam raised her head, glaring slightly. "Well you know that's what we've always said, and so we never talked about it and he will never talk about it. So that's why we're in this mess maybe, you know? So I personally think it's time to talk about it."

"I think I agree," said Anissa, in her careful way.

"I think we have to. I mean, the last two times he's come back he's refused to talk about the reasons . . . you know, acted kind of sheepish, as if he thought maybe it was his own fault, but still wouldn't talk."

There was a silence. "O.K." said Esme. "But nothing leaves this room. And we use what comes out today to try and work this through with him."

Paul looked pained. "O.K.," he said. "But I'm not sure this is ethical."

"Maybe it's more ethical," said Anissa gently, "than us leaving and having a bunch of separate conversations about him. Maybe we can make a difference this way."

There was another silence.

"Well I want to say right away," said Luke, "that I value Jesse's contribution to this group. I like his boldness, the way he's willing to stick his neck out. It's a pushy energy, but it often gets things done."

"It's an ugly male energy," said Yoko. "Domination energy." "Yeah—like this," said Antonio. He began chopping the air with his hands, in imitation of Jesse making a point. He raised his head slightly, his chin thrust forward. He stared with mock Jesse-belligerence at Esme, who laughed, a little guiltily.

"Exactly," said Yoko.

"Well come on!" said Paul. "Someone could mimic your way of gesturing too, you know."

"But it's true," admitted Luke. "He kind of likes to put you up against a wall."

"I mean he's so tight!" continued Antonio. "He doesn't know how to dance, you know what I mean? His timing is off."

"What do you mean, dance?" said Paul, incredulously.

"I mean that before we are even talking we are dancing, you know? I mean even before we open our mouths we are making meaning together, because our bodies are expressive, you know? Our bodies are already framing the world as meaningful."

Antonio paused. No one said anything, and he went on. "We're all sitting facing each other at this table, looking at each other. Everything is happening at once. Everything has an effect: shift

of posture, lifting of arm, tension of back and neck, movement of head and eyes when talking, when listening. I mean we are in dialogue with our bodies. It's kind of magic—action at a distance. You might not think much of it, but without it we can't talk."

"Why not?" asked Paul.

"Because through this stuff—gaze patterns, facial expression, posture, and so on—we are maintaining each other, maintaining the feeling state necessary to think, and to keep talking without the conversation breaking down."

No one spoke. "You want me to go on?" said Antonio.

"Yeah, go on," said Paul.

"Not only maintenance, but heavier than that—co-construction of body images, because we are being revealed to ourselves through the reactions and the actions of each other. It's a dialogue of body images. We're incomplete without the other person to do this for us."

"But we're always hidden from each other too."

"Yeah, well, it's an interplay, a dance of the hidden and the revealed. It's a kind of inarticulate drama. Now I would guess that Jesse would deny he's located in this space of interconnection, of transgression, of involuntary interplay, or whatever you want to call it. That's denying our grounding in the body. And just like our mental perspectives get coordinated through following the argument, our bodies get coordinated through this gestural dialogue too. We develop a kind of style, we understand each other with our bodies. When the moves are good, we knit, there is a sense of shared excitement which is expressed gesturally. We sit and gaze differently for each one who addresses us. If there's a rogue among us, who irritates, confuses, or infects us, our whole group style changes."

"But Jesse often says pretty cool things, even though his body language is hot," said Anissa.

"Well the gestural and the propositional can diverge. Like, the gestural can comment on the verbal by being either over or under, either hotter or cooler than the propositional. There are gender differences too. Then differences man to man woman to woman, man to woman, woman to man. . . . And sometimes individuals can blow up the group gesturally, or spook it, or stop it, or move it. Some people are gifted that way and some people aren't, you know! Some people like to play and some people are uptight. But everybody's connected, so everybody makes a difference. Even if you're sitting there like this." He drew his body together, made a line of his lips, and struck a pose of exaggerated woodenness.

Yoko laughed. "That's me, right?"

Antonio laughed back. "Hey, don't get para-

noid. . . Now, Jesse. . . ." He paused.

"Well," said Paul. "He dances. He just dances a little hard, a little rough."

"I would suggest," answered Antonio, "that he's using gesture to be powerful, in his own personal interest, you know? Like if I—" Antonio shot out his arm, heel of hand extended, as if to short-arm Luke, who was sitting directly across the table from him. Luke recoiled involuntarily. "There," said Antonio. Now that's how he dances. That's what's really going on gesturally with Jesse."

"You know," mused Esme. "You're right. I mean about the gestural. Sometimes I feel like shouting 'Freeze!' and see what position everyone's in. Do you? Or what if, with Jesse, if someone, I mean a real expert, were filming us together, and you could see everybody together and also every individual. How do you suppose we would all be moving at that moment—the split moment just before he rose and walked out?"

"Yeah," Paul said. "How do you know we wouldn't find something in those tapes that you, or I, or the rest of us were doing to Jesse? Some other style of subliminal straight-arm?"

"On the other hand," said Anissa, "Jesse can do all these wonderful things with words. I mean when he talks, he makes it appear like there's nothing in between the thought and the word."

"I just hear standard logic talk," said Yoko. "If not this, that, if not that this, if both this and that, this. And so on."

"What he's trying to do is hold down the formal language end," insisted Anissa. "Somebody's got to do that. We each have our discourse—and we're each always translating, always having to be translating. I mean people talk all different ways—in stories, or long loops, or jagged cuts, or lapidary summaries, and so on. And then there's the original language, even if you're speaking English. Take Antonio: not only is he a poet, but he's primarily a Spanish speaker, right Antonio? And Miriam, you're Latino too, but you like to go around and around, you keep circling a point until it starts to emerge. Yoko, I would characterize you as ironic, if you'll forgive me labeling you. Aphoristic too—you can slam off a phrase which simply stops us in our tracks. Now Jesse holds down the logic chopper's discourse—Mr. Systematician. Hey, we are a community of translation. On one level, that's all we're doing—just translating, translating, translating."

"But what about the music," said Yoko. "How do we sing?"

"Yes!" said Esme. "In fact I think the music in the speech grounds it even more than the gestural."

"But here," said Anissa "the music is never one music. If anything, this is opera. In fact I've always

wanted to sing a session—I mean everyone sings it, whatever they're saying."

"Or tape it, then mask the words, so all you hear are the melodic," said Antonio.

But Yoko wanted to go back and pick up Anissa's point. "His discourse," she said, tossing her straight, jet-black hair, "is aspiring to be the translation. I mean everything else is a translation, but his is where language and logic meet."

"How do you know that's what he believes," asked Paul.

"Because of the way he dances and sings it," said Yoko shortly.

"It's like he can't hear the argument," said Miriam, her slim, brown, hand playing with her pencil. "He's always involved in local disputes. Guns blazing, you know? Intellectual macho man! Always arguing! Or else using someone else's idea to get to his own. But as for where the argument is going—the way its shaping on the horizon? I mean there is an emergent field of ideas we're playing in here, beyond the law of contradiction."

Luke straightened in his chair. "Hey, that's the dialectic. No one said this was going to be easy. You've got to pick up every stitch. He's just being responsible to the material. Critical comes from the word crisis, you know. You just got to learn to live in crisis."

"Yeah," said Yoko, "but you've got to trust the argument to unfold through that crisis. It plays. It plays with us. But if you keep digging in your heels, saying hey this ain't syllogistic or whatever, you're just limiting the play of the dialogue."

"But we each have function. Jesse is concerned about getting lost. He wants to take little steps, and be sure of each step."

"Say what you like," said Miriam, "but I think that's a kind of failure of nerve. We shouldn't be disciplining the play of the argument."

"Well you shouldn't be, maybe. Does that mean Jesse shouldn't?" asked Paul.

"The argument dances just like the gestural dance, it plays, and hides, and blows up, or shrinks. It operates under the lure of the whole



just like we do. You've got to respect that."

"But it does so by going from case to generality to case to generality, and so on—one crisis after another. The case can discipline the generality. Jesse makes sure we are not playing too fast and loose, and letting the generalities sweep the cases off their feet."

"Or put it this way," said Anissa, finally getting to speak. There are two kinds of logic, the logic of classes and the logic of relations. You're talking about the logic of relations, which intuitively understands its own current position as moving from part to whole, from fragment to system, towards ever more comprehensive systems of relations, and often leaping wildly beyond the current data in order to reach greater generic spread. But if we were all logic-of-relations thinkers, the argument would get lost for sure. Talk about la-la land!"

"Besides, what do you want, a party?" Paul interjected, with uncharacteristic heat. "The argument is never more than partially visible—its always more or less obscure, contested, at risk. Conflict is necessary to development! Hey, the dialectic!"

"Yeah, but unless I can feel it I can't follow it."

"Oh, he feels it," said Esme. Her blue eyes glowed. "That logic chopping, what seems so harsh and limited to you, is a form of love for him. He loves the argument and where it's going just as much as you and I do. He's got a passionate mind."

"Mind on the make, more like," said Antonio.

"No," Esme insisted. "His passion is tragic maybe, his love is kind of self-destructive. But that just means he needs healing—like the rest of us. He needs for us to complete him, to help him get balance. We're a community of love as much as of gesture, or language, or mind."

Yoko and Miriam exchanged knowing looks.

"A community of love?" Paul queried.

"Yeah, at various levels—let's say at various levels of sublimation or desublimation. But this is like a group romance. We're not just dancing out the argument. We're not just after mental unity."

"You suggesting an orgy?" said Antonio, grinning.

Esme didn't blink. "Well that would be one expression of the drive. Personally, I see eros and agape as on the same continuum. But I think, beyond flirtation, and even beyond sex, it's more a drive for disclosure, vulnerability, mutual care. We experience it as a vivid sense of beauty, energy, flow. We glow."

"Hey, there's exploitation, too," said Miriam.

"Well that's a risk of the community of love," along with jealousy, unrequited love, partiality, antagonism, excessive diffidence, etcetera etcetera," agreed Esme. "But I still think that our hun-

ger for meaning and our hunger for beauty and love are the same hunger. It's what keeps us going. It's the final promise."

"I thought this was inquiry, not group psychotherapy," said Luke.

"What's the difference? Vague feeling is the primordial state of mind—feelings are vague thoughts. Where you gonna draw the line between mind and feeling? They both operate the same way—association, spread, connections, weldings. . . Remember the words of the dead white guru"—she winked—"the highest truths can only be felt."

"But Jesse pretends he doesn't have any feelings," said Antonio.

"He's going have a breakthrough," said Esme, grinning at Antonio. "You're going to teach him to play. It's just that he's afraid."

"More self-interested than afraid," I would say, offered Yoko. "On the make."

"We're all on the make," said Luke. "Jesse is just radically, radically, himself, an individual. But that individuality is necessary to move us along. In fact, the more we get coordinated, the more individual we become."

"Yeah," said Esme, "that's the law of love—"love both projects us into independency and draw us into harmony"—words of the master, man!"

"What—you got a book under the table?" grinned Antonio.

"But wait a minute," said Miriam. "What kind of individuality you talking about? It seems to me you're referring to an individuality that's completed by the group, whereas Luke is talking about one that defines itself through separation."

"Well, where are you going to draw the line?" said Anissa, her fingers playing with her hair. "It's the same drive, for totality, for the all in all. Individuality runs up against the group, and is disciplined, and is transformed through the conflicts of group life, learns to coordinate, and moves towards the other kind."

"But my point," said Luke, "is that it all starts with the drive to be somebody, to count, to make a difference. We're all doing this—we're all trapped in our own horizon, our own finitude, and negotiating from it. It's just that Jesse's finitude is a little heavier. But life is tragic, you know? And we're always in crisis. That's how we progress. Why should we be surprised by conflict, or shrink from it? Why should we consider this anything out of the ordinary—that this should happen? This isn't the boy scouts!"

"But," said Antonio, "there is the tragic that transforms the community, and the tragic that makes community impossible—that just maintains dysfunctional stuff—power hangups, exclusions,

personality struggles, ideological struggles, sexual struggles, . . . You name it.”

“But to overcome those distortions is why we’re here. To overcome fragmentation. And in that we are completed as individual persons.”

“What makes you think Jesse thinks he is acting distorted?” said Yoko. “My impression is he thinks he’s fine, and we’re all a little slow, or not well-trained enough philosophically, or something.”

“Well that’s just it: if he stays in, even if it’s painful, we are strong enough as a community to limit his dominating, disruptive tendencies.”

“It’ll probably get worse.”

“Maybe, but that’s because of love,” said Esme. “Love draws us toward self-disclosure, but that self-disclosure discloses the darkness and abjectness we all carry, our particular forms of selfishness. The more we see into each other, the more we need to tolerate.”

“Meaning, the closer a group gets, the more dangerous things get?” said Paul.

“But,” said Yoko, “there are also certain conditions of . . . what shall I say—*isolation—moral, intellectual, that can wreck a group—or at least stop it from growing.*”

“The community is more powerful” Esme answered. “We confront. We sacrifice. Our very self-discipline in bearing with Jesse, as well as confronting him, heals his separation.”

“Sounds a little pie-in-the-sky. How do you know our sacrifice is more powerful than his isolation?”

“Well I don’t. The outcome is never assured.”

“What I wonder,” said Paul, “is whether Jesse might not be right to slam out of the room. How do we know we aren’t caught up in this group illusion that we’re all fine, but we’re really in the bubble of group complacency, and whatever the appearance, his action is part of the larger plan, to pull the argument along? Maybe in a sense he’s doing the sacrificing here, whether he knows it or not, and what we judge to be losing our way is exactly the path: that it’s not his solipsism that’s at issue—no matter how solipsistic he really is—but ours as a group. What if that is the case?”

There was a thoughtful silence.

“I’m starting to feel a little lost” said Luke. “Could we summarize? And where will this lead in terms of Jesse? I mean, what are we gonna do?”

“Summarize?” said Paul thoughtfully, shaking his head, looking around.

“I’ll try,” said Anissa. “How about if we call what we are involved in here five communities instead of one. There’s gesture, language, mind, love, and this last one, I guess one could call it interest, in that it’s about the vicissitudes of self-love in all of us.”

“How come you call them communities?” asked Miriam.

“Because each is the expression of a communicative, interpretive process, converging on a common body of signs, some of those signs natural and some intentional, some exoteric and some esoteric. Each community is involved in a developmental process of change in which every member is determinative in some way of the group as a whole, yet the group has an emergent character that transcends any one individual. Each community is uninterpretable in any complete sense apart from the others.”

“Then there are these other things we keep talking about, which we seem to find ourselves thinking and saying and doing over and over again, dynamic communicative patterns. The major one seems to be crisis—I think I’ve heard that word a lot this afternoon, said one way or another. Crisis seems to be how we move—you have to go off balance to go forward and find another balance, and so on. Then there is conflict, which is like it, but more general. Conflict seems inevitable. Necessary even. Yes?”

“Well but—” began Antonio, but Paul stopped him with a raised hand. Antonio nodded assent.

“Then there’s dialogue. It seems to run through everything: gestural dialogue, mental dialogue, erotic dialogue, and so on?”

“O.K.”

“Then there is play. Antonio was talking about play. And there is the play of the argument, and language play, and the play of gesture, and the play which is our political life, and the the play of love.” She paused. “And—what shall I call this one?” she mused. “Some of you aren’t going to like it, but I’m going to claim it. I’ll call it *telos*, or teleology. I mean, we seem definitely to be going somewhere. There definitely seems to be a horizon towards which we are all in motion.”

“And what horizon would that be?” said Yoko. “The next paycheck?”

“No, some kind of unity, or coordination, some state of reasonableness which draws us, lures us along.”

“Always over the next hill!” exclaimed Luke.

“Finally,” Anissa took a deep breath. “Maybe the most important one of all. No, they’re all equally important, but this one is actually a virtue, a kind of operative virtue. Let’s call it discipline. That’s easy to see: the discipline to talk, to not talk, to do whatever is necessary to hold the ship of the argument on its course.”

Anissa stopped. She was clearly finished.

“And Jesse is a member of each of these communities of signs,” said Paul, “and also a participant in these forms of—what did you call them?—dynamic intersubjectivity? Like crisis, conflict, di-

alogue, and so on. And it seems to me . . ." Paul paused for what seemed an endless moment. "That . . . that all of these problems we've identified in Jesse are really ours as well, that they cannot be distinguished. I mean that if I, or you, Antonio, or anyone else in this room got up and slammed out of the room three times, and the third time we'd had enough and had this talk about you, well I don't doubt that we would identify some element of brokenness, or dysfunction, or woundedness, or selfishness, or limitation, or excess, or deficiency . . . in each one of us, in each of these areas. There is some area in which I've forgotten how to play, or been scared out of daring love. As a member of the community of mind, there are plenty of ways in which I would lose sight of the argument if all by myself, because I'm weak in grasping those connections. In that sense maybe our most important function is as the community of love, because it is there that the possibility for the healing of the individual by the group and the healing of the group by the individual (although that one's trickier to describe) lies."

Another long pause. "So we could in a sense say that Jesse has sacrificed himself by being the one who has undergone this probing. That maybe his brokenness is extreme enough so that it shows up, but if we all suppressed our brokenness, like the rest of us tend to do, we would never really move off the starting line . . ."

"So what does that mean we should do?" insisted Miriam. "I mean how we gonna handle this? I mean it obviously just can't be shoved under the rug anymore."

There were nods of agreement. Then the door opened. It was Jesse. He walked in and sat down.

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*Address correspondence to:*

**David Kennedy**  
Dept. of Human and Environmental Science  
Western Carolina University  
Cullowhee, NC 28723  
USA