

# Five Dials



NUMBER 24

*The 'B' Issue*

AMY LEACH 5 *On Pandas and Bamboo*

JOHN BANVILLE 7 *On Beginnings, Middles, Ends*

BRIDGET O'CONNOR 10 *Three Stories*

*... plus bear illustrations like you won't believe.*



## CONTRIBUTORS

BANVILLE, JOHN: Born in Wexford, Ireland, in 1945. Books include *The Book of Evidence*, *The Untouchable*, and his most recent novel, *Ancient Light*. Man Booker Prize winner in 2005 for *The Sea*.

BECKY BARNICOAT draws comics for *The Stool Pigeon* and also her blog [everyoneisherealready.blogspot.com](http://everyoneisherealready.blogspot.com). By day she is the commissioning editor on *Guardian Weekend*. She lives in London.

Blackpool raised, born in Liverpool, NEAL JONES studied Fine Art in Canterbury before packing it in to live aboard a 1920s wooden pinnace, travel Britain in a van and survive on DIY and gardening work. He returned to art via a year at The Prince's Drawing School, becoming a John Moores prizewinner soon after. He now paints and gardens daily on his vegetable allotment garden in North London.

Before recently moving to Montana, AMY LEACH lived in Chicago. Her book, *Things That Are: Encounters with Plants, Stars and Animals*, will be published by Canongate in June, 2013.

BRIDGET O'CONNOR is the author of two collections of stories, *Here Comes John* and *Tell Her You Love Her*. She won the 1991 *Time Out* short story prize. Her play, *The Flags*, was staged at the Manchester Royal Exchange and her screenplay for *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*, which she co-wrote with her husband, Peter Straughan, was filmed by Tomas Alfredson and released in 2011. She died in September, 2010.

Because her musical ability was found wanting LIZZY STEWART opts to tell stories using pictures. Working from a studio in North East London, she has produced illustrations for the *New York Times*, Random House and *The Guardian*.

Editor: CRAIG TAYLOR

Publisher: SIMON PROSSER

Assistant Editor: ANNA KELLY

*Five Dials* Staffers: MARISSA CHEN, NOEL O'REGAN, SAM BUCHAN WATTS, ROSALYN CROEK  
JAMIE FEWERY, JAKOB VON BAEYER

Designed by: DEAN ALLEN

Illustrations by: BECKY BARNICOAT, LIZZY STEWART, NEAL JONES

Thanks to: MICHELLE KASS, JENNY LORD, JENNY FRY

## On Bears, Bridget and B

FOR SOME reason – who knows why – we got to thinking about bears not so long ago. After conversations with a few of our regular illustrators we began to receive drawings of bears. They arrived in dribs and drabs, these great roaring JPGs: black bears, grizzly bears, pandas. Drawing bears for an illustrator is like casting practice for a fly fisherman. It's good to keep the muscles in shape. 'Bears come ready-anthropomorphized,' said Becky Barnicoat, one of our loyal illustrators, who contributed artwork on pages 11 and 18. 'Standing on their hind legs, they're somewhere between animal and human; snuggly and ferocious. There's the tension between the gentle giant who might doff his cap at you or show off his new shoes, and the beast who might clamp your head in his jaws. That,' she said, 'is the perfect inspiration for a drawing.'

Not long after our collection of bear illustrations expanded, we received an essay on bears by the talented American writer Amy Leach. She was not only fixated on the feeding habits of the panda, but also on the ways of the beaver in another essay entitled 'In Which the River Makes Off with Three Stationary Characters.' We could only take one essay: panda it was. (The full title is 'Radical Bears in the Forest Delicious'.) The inspiration for Amy's essay came circuitously. She'd originally written a long essay about neutrinos. 'After I finished it,' she wrote to us recently, 'I realized the only interesting part of it was a reference to panda bears and the fallibility of their food. So five years later I took that subject and wrote a wholly different essay. The other bear essay I've written is about the Great Bear, made of stars.' After receiving Amy's essay we were given the chance to discuss fiction with John Banville, who was typically wise and caustically funny, and then, like the midpoint of any cheap thriller (not by Benjamin Black, may we point out), a crucial epiphany like a thunderclap above our heads cracked across the midsummer London sky. Bears, beavers, Banville, Becky Barnicoat and then, of course, Bridget.

The language of literary agents can be unnecessarily frothy. When an agent told us recently that her favourite short story of all time was unpublished and up there with all the greats, we listened with suspicion. Before fans of Cheever, Munro and Junot Díaz respond, before we get a letter stuffed with an old photocopy of Shirley Jackson's 'The Lottery', we'll admit Bridget O'Connor's story 'We Do Not Forward Suicide Notes' may not be your choice as the greatest of all, all, *all* time, but read it and place it somewhere in the firmament. If possible, try and track down O'Connor's collections, *Tell Her You Love Her* and *Here Comes John*.

Her stories move in unexpected ways, darting about on the mysterious, unstable tendrils of her language. The trio of unpublished stories you'll find in this issue left us wishing for more, which sadly won't be possible as O'Connor died in 2010 at the age of forty-nine, just after finishing the screenplay for the 2011 film *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy*, leaving behind her daughter, Connie, and her husband and sometime writing partner Peter Straughan. 'Short stories were her first and enduring love,' Peter wrote in an email to us not too long ago. 'Despite the posthumous Bafta and Oscar nomination I don't think she ever thought of screenwriting as *serious* writing. That was prose. She worked on the movies because we enjoyed doing them together. And because she got to go to parties.'

When she was younger, O'Connor had various jobs in London: working in a canteen on a building site, as an education worker at Centreprise, working in a bookshop on Muswell Hill. She would always write. 'She was still working at the bookshop when she heard she had won the *Time Out* short-story competition and could now "officially" think of herself as a writer,' wrote Peter. 'Some of her stories would be completed in a day or an evening. Some she would work on for weeks. Some she would return to and re-work, sometimes years after finishing a draft.'

Her favourites were Flannery

O'Connor, Raymond Carver, Katherine Mansfield, but even amongst those who wrote novels – Richard Yates, Edna O'Brien, William Trevor – it was their short stories she loved most.

'A favourite novelist was Beryl Bainbridge,' said Peter, 'who, even in her novels, seems to me to be somehow a kindred spirit to the short-story writer.' He went on: 'A little while ago I found a notebook Bridget had as a young teenager, in which there were several "stories" – inevitably short ones. Some were from the age of ten. In some ways she never broke with this habit, but it was reinforced for her by the fact that many of her favourite authors were short-story writers. I think her talent was for the kind of aesthetic which belongs naturally to the short-story form: an aesthetic of the moment, the episode, of disunity and fracture. She was drawn to darkly comic stories, and part of the joke was the withholding of the "what happened next" to a character – the classical resolution that the novel traditionally supplies. But this is all supposition. Bridget didn't discuss why she wrote. She was, rightly I think, suspicious of such motive probing.'

We were interested, as we often are, in the details. Bridget was a fast typist; she often rented a bare office if she had a deadline; she had a green, woollen cardigan which she worked in. 'Not always,' Peter pointed out, 'but often enough that I always think of her at the desk wearing it.'

He and Bridget had worked on several film scripts before *Tinker Tailor*. 'The first time we tried to work side by side at the computer, but that was disastrous – some of the only rows I ever remember us having. When you're writing dialogue you tend to slip into a natural rhythm, and trying to come up with lines between us slowed that process down. So we developed a system – Bridget working on a scene in her study, me working on a scene in mine, and then swapping over and redrafting each other. Lunches and coffee breaks were for reviewing and planning. By the time we were working on *Tinker Tailor* this was a painless system and, despite the complexity of the plot, I remember how much fun we had working on the script. I think I'm much more of an adaptor – structuring and

restructuring existing material. Bridget was a *writer* – endlessly inventive and creative. If we were looking for a scene or image to reveal character or advance plot, Bridget could always come up with it. Smiley swimming in Hampstead Ponds in the wilderness of his retirement, Peter Guillam having to sacrifice his lover in order to help Smiley, the bee in the car – these were all Bridget’s ideas, and I think came from the short-story writer in her – the ability to discover the *moment* that can reveal the truth about a person or situation.’

Tomas Alfredson, who directed the film, wrote and told us that meeting Peter and Bridget was one of the main reasons he decided to take on *Tinker Tailor* and embark on the impossible task

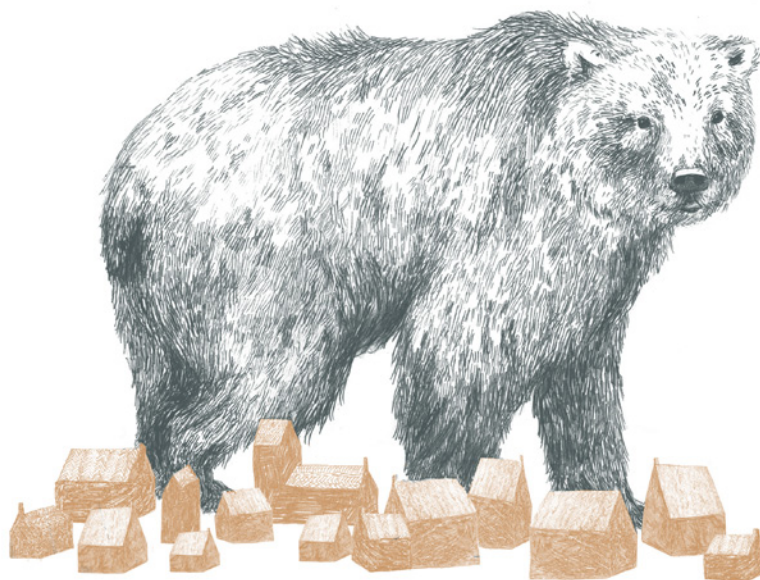
of picking apart the plaited strands of le Carré’s novel. ‘Bridget died a few days before we started shooting,’ he said. ‘It wouldn’t be true to say that I knew her. In America, a person can “love” everyone and “know” everybody. Where I come from you love your wife and kids, hate your parents and know three or four people. Bridget and I did not share enough time together to know each other in the Swedish sense. Artistically, though, I know the part we shared in this production. By being beautiful, smart, talented and like someone I’d known all my life, I felt I knew her. I felt I could dare do this film.’

Working in an open-minded manner, being disrespectful in a respectful way, offering up a third of fourth or fifth sug-

gestion, making Smiley a swimmer, his head bobbing in Hampstead Ponds, even adding the visceral, shocking moments in the film – the image of the nursing mother shot in the head while her baby continues to suckle – these were the marks of a short-story writer. ‘This extremely complicated script was created in less than a year. Looking at it now I can’t understand how the hell they did it,’ said Alfredson. ‘Bridget was a brilliant writer and a very warm person. Although she’s not here I can easily see her bright blue eyes.’

You’ll notice there are four ‘B’s in that last quote. Enjoy Bridget’s stories. Enjoy the rest of the issue.

—CRAIG TAYLOR



# Radical Bears in the Forest Delicious

By Amy Leach

THERE ONCE was a king of Babylon who was too proud, so he was given the mind of an animal and put out to pasture. For seven years he roamed the fields on all fours and munched on grass, after which period he was allowed to return to his palace and rich robes of purple, his barley beer and skewered locusts and royal hairdresser, who gave him back his dignified ringlets. (Along with an animal's mind he had been given the animal's hair stylist.) It is not specified which animal's mind Nebuchadnezzar received, but from his glad return to civilization and fine cuisine we can infer that it was not the mind of a panda bear. If he had had a panda's mind for seven years, in the end he would have rejected the restitution of his kingdom; he would have somersaulted away, to continue leading a free, elusive, unfollowed life.

Having followers is an honour pandas dream not of. There is no tragoan so trustworthy, no bushpig so dependable that they would want it tagging along. Pandas even head away from pandas, like the stars in the universe, spreading further and further apart (you can never be too far away to say goodbye) – except their territory is neither infinite nor expanding, and in order to deliver more panda bears into existence, they can't just scatter into particles at the end. Pandas come together every two years or so; marriage isn't always marriage of the mind.

Maybe if they had been given a choice they would have picked a less conspicuous coat, one better to correspond with their reclusive spirit. Admirers can be secret admirers and afflictions can be secret afflictions, but pandas cannot be secret pandas, since they contrast dramatically with green ferns, grey rocks, pink rhododendrons and their own bellies and ears and legs. They are showy bears, sensationally visible, which might actually be an advantage for a solitary species: the easier to avoid you, my dear. Camouflaged animals must always be bumping into one another.

What does the animal do all day that is not engaged in society; its duties and

pleasures and ferments? There may be some wedging in trees, some gazing into the mist, some fiddle-faddle. Sometimes the panda breaks an icicle off a branch and tosses it into the air over and over till it melts. Sometimes, trotting pigeon-toed across a hillside, he trips, then rolls, because he is round; having enjoyed that, he climbs back up and rolls back down. He might pick wild irises or crocuses and recline among the fern-fronds to eat them, or lounge underneath a weeping willow, munching on the little leaflets that dangle into his mouth.

Mostly what pandas do with their time is eat bamboo. Bamboo, that sturdy wooden grass, makes up to 99 per cent of their diet, and they eat it for up to fourteen hours a day. They have to consume it constantly since they are only assimilating about 20 per cent. Their penitential diet is a mystery; pandas are like celery saints – everyone else is convivially dining on stuffed eggs, truffled fingerlings, little pies and oranges, enjoying the table-side crooners, while out behind a bush sits a celery saint with his basket of celery: crunch, crunch, crunch. Eat enough pies and you can put aside the desire for food and pursue something else, such as a cow-hand. Rare is the romance of the celery extremist.

With their carnivorous anatomy and herbivorous behaviour, it is as if pandas are pledged to an ancient covenant – as if they used to be *bon vivants* like other bears, blood and berry juice staining their muzzles, slugabeds all winter, until one day they fell into a trance and received a deep message: 'You are standing, pandas, on the very borders of the eternal world, but you have become charmed with infatuating food; the subtle poison of sensuality courses through your veins. You must disregard custom and the strong clamouring of appetite and passion. It will take, at times, every particle of willpower which you possess; but give yourselves wholly to a bamboo diet, and guided by firm, unspotted principle, your lives will become pure and noble.' Thus was

formed that radical sect of bears, the Bamboois. Modern-day Bamboois show a remarkable resistance to temptation: a stream runs by, serving up fresh fish, and what does the panda do? Wades across, to get to a stiff thicket of bamboo on the opposite side.

But willpower might not entirely account for such abstemiousness any more. Bamboo is not power food, and the bear that eats it is not a power bear, and swiping fish from the river takes energy, as does sleeping all winter. If you're going to sleep for seven months, you need to eat your hickory nuts, your ungulates, your honey. Bamboois have to stay awake all winter to eat bamboo – incidentally, witnessing the sapphirine sparkles of snow falling from a branch, the cliffs draped with icy fringes, the white snow powdering the green bamboo leaves. (Could any dream compare with winter?)

What does a panda know that studies just a few cloudy-mountain miles of the world? From her experience she must know about fallibility. Icicles melt, flowers fail, intangibly small babies grow tangible and autonomous, and one day when you come back from foraging to collect yours from the tree fork where you left him, he is gone. Mushrooms, moonlight, everything is ephemeral, with one exception: bamboo. Bamboo never fails, bamboo is eternal, evergreen, green in the orange season, green in the white season, green in the green season, poking up sweet little shoots into the spring rain. Blessed is the bear that trusteth in bamboo.

For lucky pandas it is true, bamboo never fails. Bamboo can be eternal for a hundred years, which is four times as eternal as panda bears; but there is in the character of bamboo a devastating defect. Most grasses stagger their dying, piece by piece, like an orchestra – though a trombonist goes down, the collective life carries on. The trouble with bamboo is that it crashes all at once: after a century of continuous availability, the entire thicket flowers together, dies together, and like a dead orchestra it can take twenty years to get back on its feet.

At this point an animal might wise up and become a Whateverist. With so many edibles in the world why consume, almost exclusively, a miserably nutritious, erratically fallible one? It's not as if bamboo is

FUCK  
OFF



BECKY BARNICOAT

pleasant to eat, like horse beans; bamboo splinters poke and scratch the swallower all the way down. That old covenant was arbitrary and perverse; bamboo is a silly staple; specialism is folly. Consider pragmatists – when the linguini runs out, a pragmatist will eat the centrepiece, and when that is done he will eat the tablecloth. As pragmatists have no principles, their numbers are myriad.

But pandas betrayed by bamboo go looking for bamboo. For there is such a thing as specialized hunger, being hungry for one thing – similar to specialized loneliness. Sometimes they don't have to travel far; pandas eat several kinds of bamboo, and even though arrow bamboo collapses, there might be umbrella bamboo growing nearby. Sometimes they have to go farther

afield, and sometimes they travel in pitiful directions – would you know which way to go to find a hotbed of celery? – until their coats don't fit very well any more. Vagrancy used to be easier on the animals, because there used to be more forest. Even if an expedition wasn't efficient, it was foresty all the way, just as the journey from earth to heaven is milky all the way. Now, between patches of forest, there are villages and gravel mines, steep cornfields, dance tents, frightened people waving blankets, mushroomers, other things to avoid.

People have tried to help pandas become pragmatists, to see sense, to switch to alternatives during a bamboo strangulation. And in captivity they comply – they eat the yams and bananas and fish set before them. But compliance is not conversion. When

they are set free, pandas return to their ruinous fidelity to bamboo, shuffling past opportunity – for on the far side of that hill might be the Forest Delicious, where they can lie back, in the million-column sanctuary, a bamboo cane in each forefoot, crunching on the one and then the other, munching on flappy bundles of leaves. There are fewer than twenty-five hundred free pandas left and they're all in the same boat, made of bamboo. When it goes down, they go down with it, into dark water, and they won't switch to another boat, not for all the tea in China. Pandas have their own wisdom, unaccountable and unamendable, whose roots shoot down deeper than we can penetrate, and if they mind anyone at all it is someone more elusive than man. ◇

# ‘I have to be very deep indeed. I’m no longer myself; I’m somebody else.’

*John Banville on beginnings, Strindberg, and kneeling before the goddess*

ON THE day we spoke to John Banville, he had been ushered into a meeting room in his publisher’s offices in London, where, on a table, a few stacks of hardcover copies of his latest, *Ancient Light*, awaited his signature. With a few strokes of the pen they would become special editions. But how many books can you sign, Banville asked as we walked across the room, before the editions are no longer special? *Ancient Light* is Banville’s second novel since *The Sea*, which won him the Man Booker Prize in 2005, and in it he reintroduces characters from previous novels, including the narrator, Alexander Cleave, an ageing actor who retells the story of an affair he conducted as a fifteen year old with a woman twenty years his senior. *Ancient Light* is a book about forbidden love, and the choice to set life against death. When asked how he thought readers would view his plot, Banville, who is now sixty-six, gave a short laugh and said: ‘What could be more alive than an affair with a 35-year-old woman when you’re fifteen? Wish I’d had it. Lucky devil. Lucky little twerp.’

SD: When do you write the beginnings of your stories? Do you write them at the beginning?

JB: Yes, I write from the first line to the last, always. But I can never remember beginnings; I can never remember where I started out. I mean, I can remember the first sentence, but I can’t remember the thinking that went into the process of getting the first sentence ready. It always becomes a haze. I can remember being on the way, and being on the way very early, but I can’t remember the actual start, which is interesting. I wonder what I’m suppressing, you know.

SD: Is it a necessary suppression? They talk about women having another baby after necessarily forgetting the pain of the last birth.

JB: I hadn’t thought of that, but yes, it probably is true. You probably wouldn’t start if you knew what was going to happen. But then when you get going, you think – well, I think – this is going to be the masterpiece of the age. Everybody else will just give up writing when this comes out. The rational part of my brain knows this is going to be another book that I’ll hate when I’m done.

SD: This is a recurring theme in interviews. If it’s this bad for you, imagine what it’s like for others.

JB: Well, no, it’s the old thing: the more you learn to do, the more you realize you can’t do. How limited it all is. When I was starting out, if I could get off a good sentence once a week or so, I thought that’d be a huge achievement. Now, because I’m so much more demanding of myself, I have to get out a few good sentences a day. But, one does learn how to do it. One does gain facility, and that’s dangerous.

SD: Why?

JB: If you can say anything, the danger is that that’s exactly what you’ll do. You’ll just say anything. So you have to be careful not to get lazy and not to become hubristic. You have to keep making yourself do things that you can’t do, or that you thought you couldn’t do. You can get lazy, you can get soft. You’ll write lazy, soft books.

SD: Is it slightly terrifying for you at the beginning to think of the many thousands of words that lay ahead?

JB: It’s like what you said about women having babies – you do forget. Your mind tells you this will be marvellous, this will be an easy one. My wife always says to me, this will be an easy one, John, and I say, yes, yes, it will, not like the others,

this will be an easy one. But, of course, she knows better than I. But it is necessary, to dull the forebodings.

SD: When do you know it’s not going to be easy?

JB: Usually about a third of the way through, when you’re wading, up to your armpits in mud. Because a third of the way through is where the middle of the novel starts. The middle is very, very difficult; very difficult to sustain. It sags. Tightrope walkers will tell you that it’s quite easy to walk on either end where it’s taut, but in the middle, where it sags, it’s very difficult to walk. It’s the same as doing a novel. Why novels have to be two hundred and forty pages long, I don’t know. They should really be about eighty pages. They’re much too long. But yet, if you write an eighty-page book, you realize ...

SD: It can’t breathe in the same way?

JB: You feel you’ve sort of sold yourself short. So it seems to me that around two hundred and forty pages is about the right length.

SD: That length gives you those moments of space. In *Ancient Light* there were moments where I could imagine a severe editor asking, ‘Why?’

JB: A couple of people argued with me about leaving in the long dream in the middle. But I said I had to trust myself. Maybe it’s wrong, maybe it shouldn’t be there, but I have to trust myself, to do it. In the old days, I would have said, right, that has to go, but now I trust my instincts more. And I trust that there will be connections between things that I don’t see and that early readers won’t see. I’m writing for the long haul. I expect people to be reading me – if there are still readers – in fifty years time.

SD: To come back to the tightrope, I remember Murakami talking about the physical fortitude necessary to get a novel finished. Do you find that too?

JB: You have to keep healthy. You have to keep in shape. I don’t mean you have to work out, but it is physical, and it’s physi-

cally wearing because of the extraordinary shifts in mood, in one's inner weather. You start off in the morning and your eyes are still half-closed, and around eleven-thirty you start thinking about lunch. Then lunch is a glass of water, a cracker and a piece of cheese. Then you really start working. By three in the afternoon it's hard work. By six, when you're absolutely exhausted, you have to come down from that. Well, come up from that depth of concentration you've got yourself into. And you have the first glass of wine, and your world begins to feel human again. Those shifts every day must be wearing on the system. So you have to protect against that, as best one can.

SD: Of diving that far down, and coming so far back?

JB: That's the only way, for me, to write. I have to be very deep indeed. I'm no longer myself; I'm somebody else. Somebody else writes that stuff. When I stand up from the desk, that somebody else ceases to exist. This is why readers, when they come to public readings, Q&As, they always have that look of disappointment in their eyes. You want to say to them, the person you're talking to here is not the person who wrote this book. That was somebody else. I'm just his representative, and I'm not representing him very well. But that's absolutely the case. I think, at that level of concentration, one ceases to be. Something of the personality dies at that level. Something of the ego goes. Because when I'm writing like that – and I'm sure it's true of all writers – when I'm writing at that level, my wishes are not of any mere consequence. The language itself, I think, is writing. I always make the case that people write a letter and at the end of it they say this is not quite what I meant to say. What's going on here? And, of course, what's going on is that language is doing the writing. I sometimes think that it's not we who speak; it's we who are spoken. Language is very powerful, very treacherous, very sly. It constantly deceives, it constantly cajoles. It wants us to make do with what's on the page. It'll do, let me go. So it's a constant fight with language, it's a constant agony with language, to make it do more than it wants to do, because it's a very slippery medium. I always say,

the world is round but language is square. Fitting the two of them together is very difficult. But what else would I do?

SD: When you're down there, with this treacherous language, do you ever worry that the ideas themselves will not sustain the length of a novel? Or do you trust that you've chosen a scenario and characters that they will supply what a novel calls for?

JB: I suppose, superficially, there's the worry that the material will simply run out, that it won't sustain. But it's a kind of poetry that I'm writing. My old friend John McGahern used to make a wonderful distinction. He said there's verse and there's prose, and then there's poetry, and poetry can happen in either. And since John was a novelist, he said it happens more often in prose than it does in verse. And that's what one's after, some kind of poetic glow, so that the characters and plot will be incidental to that.

SD: But one that seems tethered to the real world too?

JB: Well, it has to be, it's all the material we have. All novelists, at heart, want to write about nothing, like Flaubert, Joyce. All writers want to do that, but we can't. We live in this vulgar place, vulgar in the best sense of the word. This is a raucous, incoherent world we live in. And one has to find a balance between that incoherence and reality, and the coherence, the varnished coherence of art. It's very difficult to do. No point in being precious. One has to deal with the incongruities and the inconsistencies and the vulgarity in life. That's what we are, that's how we are.

SD: And you are quite precious about the words themselves. You've spoken before about only being able to write so many words per day as yourself, as opposed to [alter-ego] Benjamin Black.

JB: The job of writing, as me, is that I have to get as close to the feel and the smell and the taste of reality as I can, through the medium of words. It's impossible. A novel is not like life. A good novel can seem to be very life itself but it's not. Life, we have to live twenty-

four hours a day. You can't close life like a book and put it away. It's this constant thing that we struggle with. We don't remember the beginning, we won't know the end. All we have is this middle bit.

SD: And in getting closer, it's interesting to see how it manifests in some writers. I saw an old transcript of some of Ballard's work not so long ago and nearly every single line was crossed out on the page, except for about three. And you got a sense that it was, as you described it, about getting closer to the honesty of words. For him this meant a lot of crossed-out lines. Are you a person that crosses out lines? Or is that process happening before the line gets written?

JB: What I use is brackets. You could read one of my pages and you would get one sentence in the page if you go between the brackets.

SD: And the rest?

JB: Well, the danger with that kind of writing is that you lose spontaneity. So that you have to get to the point where you can fake spontaneity – fake it artistically. And that's very difficult.

SD: In your recent article on Strindberg in the *New York Review of Books*, I liked how you described his way of writing: the drug and the drunkenness, the hypnotic state, the swift, dream-like composition, the relief at the end. It sounds so physical, in a way.

JB: It was physical with him. He would throw the pages on the floor and just do it. But he wasn't a reviser. He was trying to do a new kind of . . . I was reading the biography, and the other one on his background, and I fell in love with Strindberg. But not my kind of writing at all.

SD: Because of the velocity?

JB: Well, no, he was a precursor to the Surrealists, and I don't like that kind of work at all. It's too complicated to go into, but I regard myself as a realist. People used to say my books were gothic, and I would say what kind of world do you live in? I always tell the story of one Boxing Day when I was driving through



Dublin, and of course Dublin was completely deserted, everybody nursing their hangovers. I was driving along, empty street, mine was the only car on it. I was the only person on the street. Except for three albino men standing on the corner, deep in conversation. If I wrote that, people would say, there's Banville being gothic again, but it depends on where you look. The world is a very, very strange place, and it never gets any less strange, it just accumulates strangeness as one goes on. So my books, as I see them, are realistic. But, of course, to go back to the beginning of the answer, it's nothing like life. It just happens to feel like life in some strange way. It's the miracle of art that somehow it feels like life. You sit in a theatre and you watch these people and you know that they've been doing this, saying the same things, night after night, for weeks maybe. Being passionate and it's the same night after night. And yet you believe in it. You watch the flats and you hope they won't fall down, and wonder if the leading lady's knickers are going to fall off or something, but still, on some level, you believe it. We go back again to that childish desire we have for a story, to be told tales.

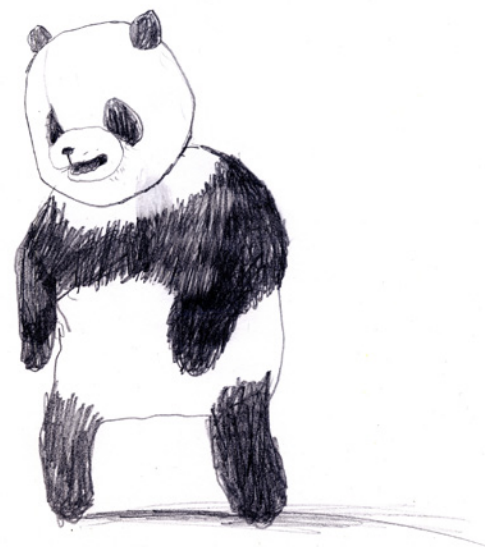
JD: Is there a reason why Alex, the protagonist in *Ancient Light*, is unable to pin events to their proper setting?

JB: Well, that's because memory isn't what we think it is. Memory is invention, memory is imagining. I'm convinced that we imagine the past. We don't imagine it entirely; it's like a collage painting, bits of reality are stuck to it. Bits of the real past are stuck to it, but behind that there is this imagined world. That's why, when we go back to places from our past, everything looks slightly different, slightly skewed. It's because we modelled that room, that person, and when we go back and visit them the model is slightly decaying all the time. So we don't remember the past, just as when we look into the sky we don't see the stars, we see light that set out billions of years ago, in some cases. We are looking at ancient light. As one of the characters says in

it, even you and I sitting here, the light between your eyes and my eyes takes an infinitesimally short amount of time, but still it takes time to travel that distance, so we're constantly looking in the past. We do, literally, live in the past, since light has to travel. It's a scientific fact. But, of course, I try to make something poetic of that scientific fact.

JD: Alex is harsh about his own past. He invents more witnesses to one of his transgressions. Is memory a sort of punishment?

JB: Well, he is Irish. We do guilt, that's our thing. I always say that I'm infinitely grateful to the Catholic Church, for my upbringing in the Catholic Church, because it loaded me with a great burden of guilt, which is a wonderful thing for an artist. We use it a lot. W. H. Auden



said that a child should be loaded with as many traumas as he can sustain because it'll be good for them in later life, and I think it's true. Frighten the little buggers.

JD: Do you feel you got enough?

JB: I think I got the right amount. I can look back now with a certain amusement and I'm still loaded with guilt. Guilt is a condition of my life. But that's not a bad thing. It's a good thing for an artist.

JD: To go back to your Strindberg article, you talk about the *Ewig-Weibliche* – the eternal feminine.

JB: *Ewig-Weibliche*, the eternal feminine. It's in the last line of Goethe's *Faust*.

JD: It's important to him, but it really seems that it's important to you as well: this idea of trying to capture the essence. For example, in this book there are so many descriptions of a woman's skin, her smell, of the different parts of her.

JB: I do kneel at the feet of the goddess. Women are strange, magical creatures to me. And I found the same was true with Strindberg. He had a wonderful line, I think I quoted it, where he asked, what is my misogyny but a helpless desire for the other sex. I think that's true. A large part of the mystery of life, for me, seems to reside in, not so much women, but what women are. What they represent. The *Ewig-Weibliche* is very important for me, and when I recently looked at the title page of my manuscript-book, I saw that I'd written *Mei \_\_\_ Book*. Why in German I don't know. A woman book, a book of women. And it is.

JD: In terms of these individual details that comprise these portraits of women, are there details you store up as you go through life – the way sunlight will hit someone on the street?

JB: There must be, but I don't do it consciously. One stores models of people. I mean, sometimes I'll see someone and think that's an interesting shape of hand, or way of turning or something, but I'm very rarely conscious of that.

JD: Do you like gathering up characters from older books? Is it like a rep company? You can draw upon characters again and again?

JB: It's an interesting question. I'm not aware of that. I can't remember very much about them. I'm so old now. I'm beginning to forget all kinds of things. I forget the colour of people's eyes, whether they were right-handed or left-handed. I'm not interested in it; I don't care. People write to me and say, oh this and that, and I say, look, I don't care.

JD: They fact-check?

JB: Yes, they fact-check. That's especially the case with translators. This book is out for translation now and I dread all the little queries that'll come in. And they'll be right, but I'll want to say to them just ignore them, just go on. Because you can't have perfection.

JD: But you could move on to other people?

JB: Oh, I will. I'm doing a book at the moment in which I've a whole new cast of people. Completely new creatures, new marionettes, with nice silken strings.

JD: Should authors always be in control?

JB: I prefer to see a little more helplessness. I like to see authors floundering a bit because I think, frequently, you do your best work when you lose yourself, when you don't know what to do. You say, I have to get out of this. You do something, and the something that you do always has a kind of strength, the strength that comes from desperation and then fear. I think that's necessary

in writing. Fear of failure. Fear of, you know, why did I embark on this ridiculous project in the first place? What am I doing sitting here? I'm supposed to be a grown-up person. Sitting here, spinning out these tales, that's no way for a grown-up to live. That terror hits every writer at least once every two or three days. This seems entirely frivolous. I could be a brain surgeon.

JD: Does the justification ever appear?

JB: I don't know what the justification would be. Of course, good art always quickens the sense of life, gives us a heightened sense of being alive on this earth. And that's a good thing. But it's no good for anything else. It can't be used for anything. You can't make yourself better, you can't make yourself happier. People will not be made better by art, and this great new notion we have, in this age that we live in, you know communal art and all that stuff – it's all nonsense. Art doesn't make us better. Nothing makes us better.

JD: Do you think it acts as a block against regret?

JB: I think art is a solace in face of the ghastliness of the world. But it's small solace. Small solace compared to falling in love, winning the lottery. A friend of mine and I agreed that money is the root of all happiness.

JD: Why don't you write short stories any more?

JB: I can't really. I wish the form interested me more. I think it doesn't interest me enough. I couldn't be Chekhov, and if I can't be Chekhov, I don't want to be anybody. You read a Chekhov story, even in translation, and you think, how did he do that? You look at the parts of it, you look at the components of 'The Lady with the Dog', an on-off love affair, yet it seems to say everything there is to be said about life and love. So I'm not going to compete.

JD: Chekhov can have it.

JB: He can have the high ground there. ◇

FICTION

## We Do Not Forward Suicide Notes

By Bridget O'Connor

He took a page from his brand-new notepad and wrote down the positives. He wrote:

- 1 *Today is the start of a journey and I am happy.*
- 2 *I have just enjoyed (although 'enjoyed' did not quite cover the tussle on the footpath) a brisk sea walk and a stimulating conversation with a dear friend.*
- 3 *Now I will have something nutritious in this...*

He looked around at the other tables hunched under their waxy dark-green tablecloths. He had the slight but vivid impression, the tables, the tables and the chairs, were inching their way to the door, to the cliffs outside. The rocks.

He looked at his first sentence. *I am*

*happy.*

Was this true?

Outside it was raining like it was raining spit. Sea and Sky the colour of a prison blanket. He was certainly happy to be inside.

Inside it was warm, at least. And there were long tubes of sugar. And if he wanted chips he could have them.

He crossed out *happy* and wrote *at peace*. Then he stole a look at the girl who sat an acre away behind the counter.

An ancient strip light sizzled above her head. In the vast, dimly lit, derelict café, she was powerfully illuminated like an actress on a stage.

He wrote, *I think I will call her Sumi. A Goddess. One day, will I call her girlfriend?*

The girl, whose name was not Sumi, sat staring down at a sheet of paper on

which she had written, NO UNEVEN SLICES OF TOAST. She had ink from the pen on her stubby fingers. She was smoking a foreign, fast-burning cigarette. He thought she looked Eastern European, from far, far away, across the sea, via airports. Maybe Poland. He had heard Poles liked the seaside. They were hardworking. They liked fairground rides. And vodka.

That was as much as he knew about the Poles.

He wrote, *find out more about the poles.*

He studied the girl. Pen poised.

She had a large head.

You couldn't help noticing how large her head was. This might have been because of her hair, which was cropped and dyed blue-black and stood up on its electric ends, as though a balloon had recently passed over her. Also, she had a long face, like a horse has a long face. Tiny, tiny, tiny eyes. She had not smiled when he entered. He wrote *teeth?* He could see the colour of her bra through her shirt. Red. He wrote *cerise.*

—You want something?

—Tea, he said. His voice came out

higher than he liked.

She jabbed a thumb at a wall covered in peeling notices, old and new.

He read, beside a laden coat rack:

DIE IN YOUR COATS.  
DON'T SHOUT, I SPEAK ENGLISH.  
PAY BEFORE YOU GO.

He frowned, confused.  
—You have to pay in advance.  
—OK, he said.  
—I bring.

She stood up, carrying a pot of stewed tea. She rounded the corner of the counter. He gaped.

She was huge.

No. Not all over. The head was large, yes, as noted, but still within the bounds of, he swallowed, normality. No. He wrote rapidly as she lumbered towards him. *It is as though the bottom half of an obese woman has been attached to the upper half of a slender one. Make this sentence more elegant.* This explained, he thought, as she aimed the tea into his cup, why the tables were set so far apart.

—You eat?

He stared at her. He nodded, coming to. And lied.

—I'm waiting for a friend.

Although the friend had died forty-six minutes ago.

—Your friend, he eat?

—Yes, we will eat, when my friend gets here.

—'Cos otherwise I close 'cos the weather is . . .

' She pointed at the window, which was smeary with grey, and rattled, as though someone, at irregular intervals, were throwing handfuls of gravel at it.

—Shit.

—Right. Shit. Got it.

He watched her walk away. She wore an outsized pale-blue tracksuit on her — astonishing — lower half, made from a sheeny material which was so thin and stretched in places that it was almost net,

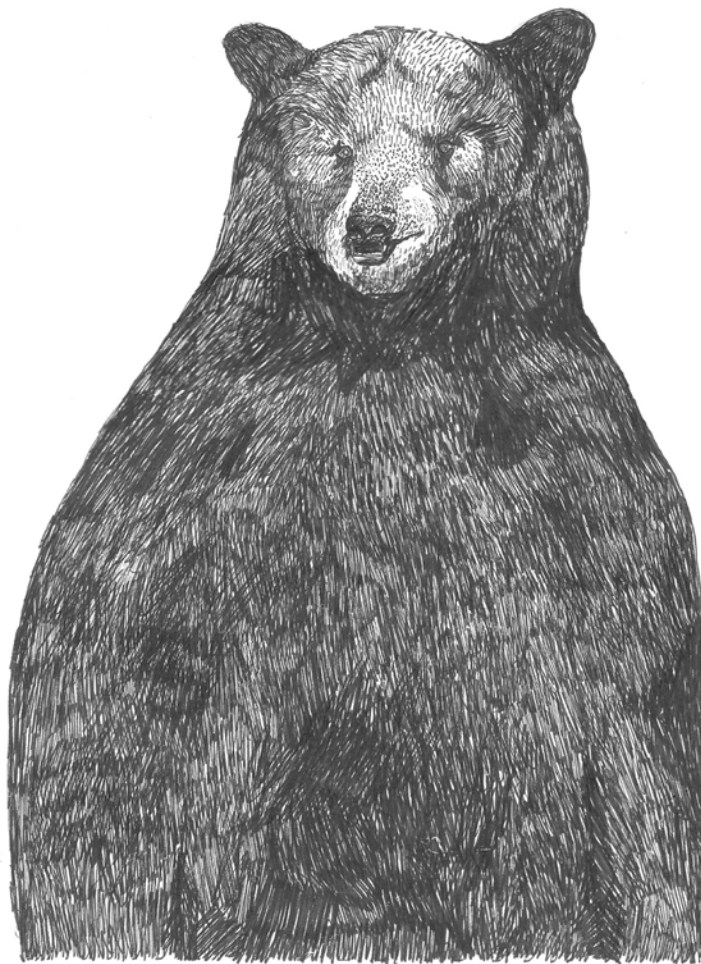
and inside it, inside it her flesh rolled like sea sickness.

She said, without turning.

—I will put the oven on.'

He picked up his pen. He wrote rapidly, sweating. He did not like surprises or shocks.

*Name: Colin Dexter. Henceforth . . . Henceforth, my name is Colin . . . Colin Fletcher and I am safe. I am safe in a café beside the (he thought for a moment) Atlantic and these are the things I am. Outgoing. Thrifty. Tidy. Descriptive. I can keep up a correspondence. I can meditate. I am punctual. I am still young. I have seventeen GCSEs. I have a wallet containing*



*forty-seven pounds fifty in my pocket. And credit cards, though not my own. I am not afraid. I am not afraid.*

His pen shook. He thought of his mentor, the Reverend Steerforth, dead now, surely, his spare biro rammed in the side of his neck, still wearing a look of disappointment and surprise at this unexpected

end to their day trip. Two looks. If he could talk, what would he say? Pull out the negatives. And? Face them.

The woman's lower half is huge, but this should not make me afraid. *We are all animals clinging with our hooves . . . no, that is not helping . . . clinging with our FINGERS, slender fingers, to . . . to the long green grass of the planet.*

The planet turned round. He thought he was going to vomit.

He wrote, *Colin Dexter*. He wrote the worst things about himself. Face them.

*I have just got out of prison.*

*I am short.*

The girl came out of the kitchen, holding up a platter on which three bound lobsters twitched.

—You choose, she said.

He gulped. He gulped because of their underwear colours, like bloody laundry, and he gulped because the lobsters reminded him of? Himself. This was difficult to explain. A note wouldn't do. He drew a sketch of a lobster and wrote *ME* above it, with an arrow pointing down.

—You choose, she said.

He chose the smallest one.

—My favourite, Sumi said. I cook now.

He followed her into the kitchen, padding in her shadow, with the intention of doing her harm. He would puncture her and she would deflate, like the Reverend Steerforth. He thought of the good Reverend deflating on the cliff face, spread out under the night sky, as though wide awake but really not, raindrops splashing the blue colour from his eyes. Later, he supposed, he would have to bury him, then track back to the car park and take care of the car.

Otherwise? Helicopters. I failed you, Reverend Steerforth, he thought. I am not, after all, he felt his throat thicken with — premature — remorse, capable of love or, he drew his hand back, the better to stab the girl, a suitable candidate for day release. Sumi turned round. She looked at the fork clenched in his hand. She looked at him. They listened to the water bubble on the stove. Then Sumi

took the fork from him – the strange thing was he *let her* – and speared the lobster into the pot.

—They scream, she said. It is upsetting, but it is over quickly.

—Yes, he said. For he did know that.

The lobster screamed once, faintly, like a girl in a park.

—Elizabetha, she said, in the silence that followed.

—Colin.

—Tonight, she said, Colin, I invite you to eat. For free.

Colin and Elizabetha sat at a table in the centre of the vast and derelict café. In front of them three candles, rammed into ketchup bottles, threw a bronzed and trembling sheen over the feast. Colin looked about him, trying to commit the scene to memory. The lobsters slid a little on their burnished field of lettuce. Some hundred yards away, a Black Forest gateau revolved slowly in a green lit-glass cabinet. The café smelled of cooked lobster and burnt-out plugs. And outside the wind blew and shook the window frames and rustled the notices along the walls. Perhaps, Colin thought, if I find myself once more incarcerated (as does seem likely) in a prison cell, I will recall this most perfect of nights. Taking his cue from the girl, he tucked a napkin decorated with ancient reindeer under his chin. He picked up his pen and wrote, *I feel strangely at peace with this giant, unblinking girl. Will we live happily ever after?*

—Tonight, the girl said, reaching for a lobster. She lowered her huge head so their eyes met, she lowered her voice so he could barely hear her, I . . .

She said something he couldn't quite catch.

—What?

—I kill myself.

He was so surprised, his hand took notes. She spoke quickly, gesturing with a claw to the windows churning with weather. He wrote:

*E. intends to fling herself off cliff face. Fuck. Reason? E. has watched many customers do this . . .*

*Question: Is suicide contagious? Will find out.*

*Revelation: Explains coat rack and limited menu.*

*First E. tries to help . . . she talks. They talk. All night, talk. They eat her . . .*

*business . . . ruined . . . they use her pen to write their suicide notes.*

*They jump anyway. They fucking jump.*

Elizabetha sucked meat between her teeth. He rested with her. Then she went on. He wrote.

*E. now so fucking depressed she eats Explains: Gigantism. But now E. knows they have right idea. Convinced she will feel no pain. This is because E. has drunk many painkillers, not because fat ass will protect against rocks. Now, all E. feels is . . . hungry.*

They ate. The girl's appetite was enormous. Colin chewed his food slowly, pushing his portions towards her, because he didn't want the meal to end. He watched Elizabetha's mouth chomping through the lobster meat; a shine gathers on her horse jaw, gloves of silver grease build up on her hands, so her black chipped nail varnish glistens. He saw his tiny self reflected in her tiny, tiny, tiny eyes. At the end of the meal Elizabetha burped grandly.

—Now, she said, I ready.

She lumbered to the door and flung it open. She was nearly knocked back by the wind. Above her head a couple of seagulls flashed their silver undersides.

—Nooo, Colin said, before he knew he would say anything.

He had time to note this new sensation: he had never wanted someone to *live* before.

—Give me one reason, Elizabetha said, without turning round, why not?

—Because . . . Colin said. He thought of all the reasons he had heard why life should be allowed to just go on . . . And? None of them would do. A green phosphorous light strobed his boots . . . and he had it.

—Because you haven't had your pudding yet!

Elizabetha nodded; this was true.

Closer inspection of the Black Forest gateau revealed a terminal disease. Colin ransacked the cupboards and found wrinkled bags of banana-flavoured Angel Delight. He sat on Elizabetha's lap and fed her yellow teaspoons. I am feeding her sunshine, he thought. She smiled sleepily, showing him a tongue so grooved that he thought, in his erotic stupor, I could lay

my palm in it. My whole head. Maybe even my . . . Elizabetha's eyes began to roll. He had to twang her cerise bra strap to waken her.

—Hey, he said. Wake up.

He said the only thing he could say. Something he had never said to another human before.

—Elizabetha, will you dance?

They danced to a Christmas compilation tape he found at the back of a drawer snappy with mousetraps, turning together at the same speed as the Black Forest gateau; Colin's head pressed into Elizabetha's solar plexus, her giant chin resting on his bald spot, one cerise breast, heavy as a postbag, on each of his shoulders. They turned until the windows ran with their condensation and the candles burned down to their ketchuped socks. When the jingle bells gave their last tinkle, Elizabetha lifted Colin up like a child and kissed him. It was the sweetest kiss, tasting of sugared banana sandwiches from long ago. *Am I happy?* Colin thought, feet swinging. *Am I?*

He opened his eyes. It took him a few moments to recognize the face, pale as the moon, pressed against the black window, a face familiar from visiting hours, bloodless lips mouthing, not homilies this time, just the two words: **HELP. . . ME.**

Three words: **HELP ME, COLIN.**

The Reverend Steerforth.

So.

Not dead after all.

Elizabetha followed his gaze. Her expression hardened.

—Another one, she said. She pointed at a notice he couldn't read on the wall.

—NO, she yelled, **MORE TIME WASTERS.** She dropped Colin and opened the door.

Before he could stop her, did he want to stop her? To his joy, he found that yes, yes he did!

He grabbed his pen, as Elizabetha hauled the Reverend Steerforth over her shoulder and – at a run – dispatched him into the inky-blue blackness beyond the cliff.

*You were right, Colin wrote rapidly, and faster than a man could fall. You were right to befriend me after all, my dear Reverend Steerforth, your faith in me was justified because look at me now. Look at me. At last I feel your love.* ♦

# KASTA SHUS BULL YA SUCKERS

By Bridget O'Connor

I HAVE BEAUTY on my side and Sal has personality. Together we make one Super Chick. That's what Jesus calls us. Super Chick.

We laugh.

We're sleeping on beaches. We keep hearing this barking. It might be wolves or hyenas or even cats. It's magnified by the sand dunes and then by the cliffs. Once you've heard it, it's like water torture. It's barking in your head.

This is my theory. Here in Greece – I mean on one of the islands not done out for clubbing, the ones that don't do roast beef on Sundays no matter how you ask – the animal kingdom, all the species in it, they got mixed up. There's been a genetic, Jurassic-something accident. Cats scream like pigs. Insects fly bum-heavy like ducks. Goats run like stallions. They've all been fucked up. That's one of our jokes. That's what we take on our travels – jokes.

Yesterday's our day off. Jesus walks up while I'm combing out my beautiful hair. It's got a lot blonder, what with all the lemons I've been nicking from Tavi's Tav. Jesus gives me his long stare, then, when it's finished, does his mime show. Surprise – did a stagger-back explosion with his hands. He'd got these puppies. He drew one in the sand for me. Pin-head, huge arse, it's a dinosaur, Sal sarked. He'd caught them, rounded strays up for Sal and me. Guess why? Because the English love dogs. He drew this in the sand. We had to guess it, like Pictionary. We had to see for ourselves. So we go for a treat on our day off. We climb a hill. Vertical. Then another. Up, up and away.

He kept the dogs in one of those white-grey stone humps sticking out like elbow bones, those ones you'd imagine a hermit climbing out of, all pissed off, like fuck-no-way I'm staying here.

He'd caught maybe twenty dogs. Most were fully grown and had gone barking mad, freaked, and because he, Jesus, as we've named him (his name's much longer than that, lots of zs and gs), he'd bricked them in, saved them from their doggy day of whimpering and whining and wander-

ing about (see him doing all this pointing, more gibberish, like we spoke Greek) in the sizzled-looking bush, pissing up the petrified bonsai vine trees, the ones Sal says look like, and they really do, frozen dwarf-fuckers from Narnia, they can't get out. They just have to ruck about in their stone grave, stand on their trembly back knees, scratch, multiply, and wait for Old King Jesus and his mighty stinking Asda carrier bag.

Jesus feeds them twice a day. He's religious about it. I've seen him backlit on the cliff. He tipped in, while we shrieked *gross!* and spat out olives stones, a vomit-load, all these leggy, still-alive and spit-coated octopi with bruised blue eyes, fish heads and dangling, half-clogged spines, entrails, bread so hard it sounded off them like rocks.

I'll never go with him again. No. Not even as a birthday treat. No. I'd rather stay on the beach and join in this cosy, knees-under-my-jumper, writing-crap-in-my-journal time. Or re-rereading Sal's vintage copy of *Valley of the Dolls*, my *Anne of Green Gables*, both classics of our time. At the dog hump, Sal held her nose, changed her mind, then flattened her hands across her ears. We stuck our heads in. A scene from hell. This fucking stench. Black. Under the noise, the sound of his – get this – disciples, a great, snapping wave coming at us made of jaws.

We heard the barking all the way back down to the beach.

Today it's a Sunday, because the bells are ringing. I'm standing knee-deep in the sea, moving my hips in time to the ding dongs like the beautiful sinner I am. Dong . . . Ding. Strands of my hair sizzling in front of my eyes. I'm wearing my black string bikini, my short black T-shirt dress with Sal's bluish sweat rings under the arms. My cat's-eye sunglasses. I'm pissed off with Sal because she borrowed them and now they've got a scratch mark across the right eye. When the sun hits them, like every fucking second, I get drilled by a hot rainbow beam. Sal's squashed her personality into denim shorts, a pink bra

top. Leather bangles on her wrists. She's preparing dinner, peeling an apple with my penknife. I'm not talking to Sal. She's not talking to me. Right. Big deal.

This is my theory. Sal and me, we've been together for so long we've pared each other right down. Like right down to basics. Like I know the insides of her rucksack like I know my own. I know what's in her head, a pint of sweaty lager. If there were a game show called *What's in Her Bag?*, and when I get back to Civilization I intend to patent this idea, I'd win it.

After the sun went down, the colour of tequila, double-quick we made up. There isn't much else to do. Sky black, sea black also. I went, Sal, what's in the bag? Sal says: ten beer bottles. Sleeping bag. Book. Journal. Condoms. Fags. T-shirt. Razor. Sarong. Towel. Sandals. Toothbrush. Jeans. Two passports. Tickets back. And wad of, we say this bit in unison, next to natch.

She'd left out the loo roll I'd nicked from Tavi's, so I won.

It's a dog's life, Sal says. We can still hear those dogs.

We're in an oil sleek, burning, lying still as a Technicolor postcard. The sea's a distant blue, like a wrinkled, kicked-back rug. Glitter is trapped in our sandy eyes. Sal's just slugged the last of our warm bottled water, dribbling it down her prison tats: mermaid on her right tit, a serpent with a mustard mug – big mistake – wound round her belly. Jesus is sitting on the sand a few feet away; stare, stare, stare. Sal's hair is up on her head in an oily red bun. Smudged mascara, eyes like two walnuts, nothing else on. I roll in my sand slick and lift my pen, it's gone banana-shaped, warped in the heat, and feel his eyes – let him look – burning sizzling holes into my long, beautiful legs.

Or today, ditto. We're thirsty. After lunch we screech in unison, Oy, Jesus, fetch, and off Jesus goes, very useful, plodding across the cursing beach life, like our very own remote-controlled dog. He lugs our sweaty water-bottle up the lumpy cliff to Tavi's taverna any time we want; moves to silhouette: curly big hair, Hawaiian shirt. Long khaki shorts. Fill it up, I yell, a Monday, a Wednesday, any day. Hurry up. Sal gets the giggles, doesn't bother opening her eyes. We knead our elbows into the sand, feel his footsteps pound towards us along the

sand. 'Bout bloody time. Heat . . . any single thought at all, ripples away from our beautiful, personality-packed bodies.

We've been on this island, Thasos or Thraos, three weeks, or it might be four. Time flickers fast here like a story in a flicker book. Sunrise. Sun going down. Steal Tavi's beer. Eat Tavi's food. Move on. Hungover.

Last night we left our zippy sand beds and crept up the few blind man's obstacles to Tavi's Taverna to raid his fridge, as per usual. Jesus, our accomplice in crime, gets the key from one of the seven places Tavi hides it (we reckon Jesus is a distant cousin or something like that, whatever, he's got pull with the old man), and he pulls open the fridge door (leaving his fingerprints). The fridge door makes a p-ying noise. On the beach the other shiny burnt people, our mates, a couple of Yanks, a German, a group of spooky Scandinavians, crackle our their beer-detecting antennae. We see their zips silver up in the moonlight. They see? Our teeth, our party-party smiles. When they see it's us they don't much bother climbing up. Me and Sal, we can get loud. We get the Budvai out and talk all night. I mean me and Sal. Jesus, apart from his super chick phrase, he's got no English. Sal and me, we can say anything, any filthy thing we like, and we do, but in this bright breezy voice. Laughing like drains we teach Jesus our alphabet, the A-Z of swear words, something we perfected in lock-downs. Arse. Bastard . . . It's funny.

Nursing a hangover in the morning, though, having to wash up a stack of oily orange plates just to earn breakfast, listening to Jesus cursing us with his big, white, dumbo smile, it don't even seem one bit hilarious.

Bernice, Sal says, what's in the bag?

*Valley of the Dolls*. Journal. Condom. Bum bag. Black T-shirt dress. Five tins of Tavi's anchovies. Six beef tomatoes. Three packets of his camel lights. A brand-new bar of Palmolive soap. Enough.

Tavi, our casual employer, he's had enough too. His eyes go like raisins. He's pointing the way out. It's end of story time. It's time to go, anyway. Without shelter, new products from somebody else's chemist, I'm sun-ageing prematurely, getting, what Sal calls, one of my things about it. In the taverna mirror I note the evidence. Hair the colour of straw and

butter, quite nice, but the lines in my sun-tan flash up white. Sal says I still look like a great beauty, though, but mostly from a distance. That girl's personality. We need shade. New scenery. Factor 58.

Jesus is silhouetted on the hill. I'm about to signal him, fuck you or something. Then he disappears behind the hermit hump. Tavi grips my arm. Go now, he says, rude. He points at the bus coughing its way to the twig bus shelter. Go, he says. We do. That is, we pretend to, giggling through the bus stop and out the other end. Then we snuck back and filled our rucksacks full from the p-ying fridge, swapped false addresses with our beachcombing mates, did a quick finger wave tra la and headed out. Jesus caught up with us by the twig, a scoop in the road, mimed he was coming with us, got down on his wide brown knees, pleading. We laughed. Went no, firmly, like you'd no a dog, wagged a finger, but when the bus bumped up, he was on it. We were driving halfway back to the docks when I remembered the puppies. Who will feed the puppies? We mimed 'dogs' at him, did this quite funny bow-wow-wow routine. Jesus frowned and shifted his gaze to the stains on the hot windows.

I went off him right then, like a finger snap. Like that.

He's a fucking nutter. I said. I screamed so hard my throat hurt. That's mostly what I've been screaming for the last ten days. Then we're laughing. Quick, Sal says. And we dive on board a bus at the second-last second. So does Jesus.

We're under a white Bacardi umbrella now. We're not happy. Write, Sal says. We're not happy. We're not fucking happy. I can hear Jesus calling us. Chick . . . Super Chick, using up the A-Z of swear words we taught him, squacking back at us in our bright English breezy tones. Sluts, he yells, smiling, flapping towards us in his floral shirt.

This morning we caught sight of his hideous hibiscus just in time, ducked under this blindingly white umbrella; had to spend a whole day's money on one plate of squid rings and chips. Jesus joined us for coffee. We scowled, turned our backs, asked the chief waiter tout to please remove the maniac from our table. Jesus lifted his shoulders, showed his palms; his eyes said something that made the waiters look at us and smile.

Fuck. Off. I said in the market yesterday. I said this right in his face. Fuck. Off. You. Creep. Then I turned on my espadrille and walked away.

He's still there, Sal says. Her voice has got a crack in it. We've had to book a ROM, as the Greeks call them – we had to: we wake up and he's lying next to us – they yell at you from the docks, Rom. Rom. Jesus is sitting in the courtyard now, the flowers on his shirt going techno in the dusk, his wide smile and fag smudgy white. I leaned from the balcony, aiming used tissues at him, pistachio nuts. Spit. Swearing. Sal pulls me back. She's got her great personality, though, so she keeps me laughing. We sit on the bed with beer, shutter him out. Sal reminds me of a few more similar pains. Pains who'd faded away along our route. She gets me to flick back in time so I do. There'd been that boy from Gateshead who'd followed us for two weeks, Mister Coincidence. Then there'd been Mary and Lou No Mates, all can we join you, can we leech your blood and marry you. Similar story. I've dog-eared those pages for easier reference.

This morning Sal found me a silver bracelet on the beach. It's class. I'm well pleased.

We've jumped the ferry and ta da, SUCKER, we're rid of him. There he is receding on the dock, tiny as a doll. We ram our fingers up at him and jiggy about on the deck, bye bye Jesus fool. He's still there as we slip over the horizon. We play 'What's in the bag?' at double speed. Book. Journal. Bum bag, toothpaste. A sheet from the Rom. A towel from the Rom.

Later we'll have two fat tomatoes each and a melted-down Mars bar to celebrate. Fistful of fags.

It's good here. Like a beach on the moon. Ios. We've been here maybe ten days. Scored a 'wee job' from the Belfast couple running the bar. Diddlydee music blares from a Tannoy. All day. The sea's a violet colour and full of jellyfish, the stingless kind, thank the fuck, rolling in on the tide, bumping your knees, quite friendly. The sands this volcanic black with broken shells speckled through it. Dandruff, Sal says, but it glitters in the mornings and hurts the eyes and, by late afternoon, leaps around our feet like lasers, trippy with my scratched cat's-eye sunglasses on. Sal does the deckchairs and makes swallows from napkins in the bar,

wipes down the tables and has constant wee fags. Every bar needs a muse and I'm it. I'm lending the bar my glamour, the length of my lemon hair. My Belfast accent is coming along nicely too. We're going out to town tonight. Clean T-shirt dress, Mary's geranium-scented shampoo, I think.

What's in the bag?

*Anne of Green Gables*, I yell, drunk. Toothpaste. Bum bag. Jeans. Kevin's lighter. Mary's kohl stick and peppermint lip gloss . . . I'm winning till Sal stuns me with a water bottle containing gin. A whole baked fish.

It's good in Ios. Sal wants to put in a good few weeks. A laugh. Last night I mimed Jesus lumbering towards us on his big hips. Kevin and Mary pissed themselves, passing round the bottle of ouzo. I could see their teeth moving in the dusk like joke dentures. Cunts, I yelled. Dogs. Sal laughs, trying to get the E word out. Ejjit.

We need our rewards on our days off.

We're camped with a pretty eco-warrior couple, honeymooners. We've smoked their draw, used their organics. We've just met, as in lain down next to, two Danish brothers. Twins. Identical, so there's been no hissy-fit over which of us has the best-looking one. (Usually, of course, me.) They're younger than us by one trillion light years, boy surfers, super-fit bores, embarrassing us big time in front of our new sarky Irish mates, the beach life, see those beauties those, and it's something to see, crashing through the waves in full-on butterfly stroke.

The water's great here. Warm. You come out coated in silver.

WE'RE IN A lorry. It's too bumpy to write. The wing mirror is full of orange groves. I'm looking at Sal's face but she's not looking at me.

This morning we're waving the twins off in town, and not exactly tearful either, when Sal points at a stall selling mangoes. I know. I spend a moment, though, travelling the length of her short burnt forearm, past her leather bangle, down the stub of her finger, the glaze through her fingernail. Pink hibiscus. Black fruit flies zinging round his head. Jesus.

And we're running, but at noon, like maniacs, when the sun can hammer you into the track. If we'd gone any faster

we'd have been thatched, a blonde and red road kill. Both of us throwing off our rucksacks in the dirt; giving vent with our fists balled into our scratchy eye sockets, crying like a fireball of premenstrual tension just swept over us. No. I couldn't believe it either. We should have known, Sal hissed. I mean, I mean, and all this snot's coming out of her nose, what sort of person leaves all those dogs? Us, I muttered back. People like fucking us. We laughed then, but in this miserable hiccupping way.

What's he following us for? Sal says. It's not even as if . . .

Then she turned and gave me her look.

You did, didn't you? she said, though 'said' is not a fair description of her tone. Nor is scream. She went . . . Birds left their olive groves. Insects as large as hairdryers fell from their perch. Then shattered. Imploded in a grey puff. Swearing at me, accusing me of crimes against decency, taste, but it didn't really matter. It wasn't true. (As fucking if. A German boy was nearer.) It was like an argument with your sister. I engaged, what about you and Mister fucking Coincidence then, got a headache in the throbbing sun for it, but we were still standing in the sandy road swearing till this red lorry picked us up.

Jesus says, Super Chick. Super . . .

He's walking behind us, fucking brazen. He's bought these steel-rimmed, mirrored sunglasses. We're caught like dwarfs in them, sticking two fingers back up at ourselves. Each time we swear at him, Jesus grins, as though great, at last, a conversation.

Today Sal spat at him as we cruised past in a Swedish camper van.

WE'RE IN Naxos. We've done Mykonos or something and Tinos, but there's only a few places beach sleepers can go. All over and then back down the same track. And we need, Sal says, counting our next-to-natch bum bag, to earn some fags.

We've hit two islands in one week. Done a wash-up job but Jesus appeared both times, smoking a fag on a bar veranda, leaving a ripe melon next to our sleeping bags or a bunch of wheat heads stuck in the sand like flowers. This morning I woke up and he was bending over me. I screamed blue murder, all my swear words jumbled out so it sounded like, Sal says, I was barking.

We still have these dog jokes going but it's not funny ha ha any more. I keep my sunglasses on full time, the fault line splitting my vision. Headache. Sal's nicked a pair that slant all the way to her ears. Like she has a banner she's got to cover made of eyes. She told me to fuck off when I said this. Yesterday we thought seriously about going home. I could sign on, I said, you could keep your head down. How long for, though? Sal said. I dunno, I said. I said, why've I always got to have the answers? Which is true. I pretend to get angry to pass the time. Then I am angry. It's always me thinking for two. (I say stuff like that.) Why can't you fucking think for yourself? (More stuff like that.) They'll put me away, Sal says, which is true because she jumped her probation, even though she only had about two weeks to wait out. Well, you shouldn't be such a robbing bitch, I say. There's a long pause while we smoke someone's fags. I'm sorry now, Sal says. I repent now. And we laugh and the sun sets, a swirl of ruby and gold. A bloody red carpet slapped on the water. Let's just blank the fucker. I said, I mean, shit, why should we leave? Why should we?

We've met a new group, a bunch of student doctors – a gaggle, a convention, no, a surgery of doctors on the beach. My great beauty attracts them, Sal's bubbling personality keeps them laughing and hanging around. We play Nurses, anaesthetized patients, drink as much of their beer as we can, slap on their factor 40 tinted creams, drain all their goodwill till they strop, wise up, hide their bath bags at the bottom of their rucksacks, close ranks. We're losing our touch because they're on to us sooner rather than later. Soon we won't even get one pea-sized squeeze from their toothpaste.

What's in the bag? I answer. Rothman's. Bum bag. Anadin. Condoms. Fred Perry shirt. Black bikini. A bottle of Paco Rabanne. A towel from the room . . .

Jesus joins us.

Beach fire. Humps of people hugging their knees in their sleeping bags. Someone strums a guitar, picking through a classical riff, big mistake down the middle . . . There's our camp fire, sand hoppers flinging themselves in, popping like sparks, the camp smoke attracting every kind of suicidal, bum-heavy fly, and then further out the sea, a rolling, oiling sheet of

blackness taking the beach with it, bit by bit, and just to the side of my eye, under a tree, Jesus is smoking.

Here comes your pet dog, someone says, or some joker befriends him, ha ha, what a fucking gas, or someone takes us to task for lording it over him in the first place. Sal doesn't even bother throwing me a look now. I never throw one back. We sit dumbly, taking the abuse. Yesterday this French student linguist rolls up. He points at Jesus sitting in the shade of a palm tree. Your friend, he says, he's not Greek. I don't know what he's speaking but it's not Greek. He's not our friend, Sal says. She says, you got a smoke?

Later, while Sal is letting him trace the serpent on her belly, I go through his rucksack, lift his wallet, his camera, a picture of his girlfriend.

I might even drop her a line.

Jesus. He's in every frame, in every picture postcard view. He's behind us or beside us or cresting a road; he's walking along with the passing traffic, rows of crooked vine trees and bright blue views reflected in his shades. We kick up dust around him. Last night, test-driving mopeds, we raced towards him, tried to scare him, both of us tunnelling sheets of gritty dust at him. He stood stock still so it was us crashing past, one foot peddling the road, steadying the bike, swearing the Jesus language we've developed. Something we haven't shared with him. Words onomatopoeic with spit. Yas shisabichalia is a favoured one. Kaststa shus bull ya sucker.

When I look in a taverna mirror or see myself reflected in a tinny yoghurt-smearing spoon, I frown. A white line sears up my forehead. The skin on my brown hands puckers; when I unclench my fists, great bags of wrinkles gather under my eyes. My hair's almost white. Yesterday I spent some of our earnings on waterproof mascara – three dinners, Sal screamed – and dabbed at my eyebrows.

I'm tired, Sal says last night, even though we've done nothing but look over our shoulder, sit on the edge of a road with our thumbs out. I had to haul her to her feet. We stood up. A warm wind blew through our hair nests, our tight shiny faces. We caught this scent of eucalyptus, pine cones. Fucking Kaststa shus bull, Sal said. The road, both sides, was swept clean and white like a line through a scalp. We

began to laugh. We're still laughing now.

WE'RE ON A strip of developed coast. Sal's lifted a change purse clean from a denim jacket on the back of a car seat, not much, but enough to keep us cleansed, toned and moisturized for a couple of dancing days. We've hidden our rucksacks under a pyramid of deckchairs on the beach. Tonight we're going clubbing.

Cheap night. The Green Stalk. Then Marabous. Then wherever. We're drunk easy on a couple of beers. Someone takes a snap of us laughing, holding up nicked giant cocktails. The ultraviolet strobe makes up ziz zag without too much effort so even Sal, who can't really dance, looked fluid, cool. Her teeth went ultraviolet, her T-shirt, the shell she wears on a greasy piece of leather string. We grinned. Danced. Kissed some bloke. Turning, I kissed another. Turned. And there he is.

We're outside. Running. People are trying to sell us things. Two girls are being sick, throwing up in unison over the rail, hiccupping brown ribcages together like twins. Clubs burping out smells. Alcohol. Coconut. Behind us, amplified, Jesus is walking. We jump down on to the beach. I cut the heel of my foot on a piece of broken glass. Even though it hurts like hell I keep running.

We've walled ourselves in. We've made a tent from the deckchairs. The sound deck from the club rumples under the sand and thumps into our backs. I can smell the stale beer hanging on our breath. Let's go home, Sal says. I nod. And then I sleep. I sleep.

We wake to the watery sunbeams, an unlit greasy grey sky. On the beach men in pink overalls are raking over the sand, shovelling beer cans into piles. Other men shovel the heap into black bin bags. Club music starts. We're getting eyeballed by a couple of touts from the clubs. An old man with spit in his voice rushes at us, beating around our hut with his stick.

Kasta shus bull, Granddad, Sal said conversationally.

Yeah, I echoed, pulling on my rucksack, knocking a stack of his deckchairs down, so fuck off.

What's in the bag? Towel from the room. A slice of Palmolive soap. A waterproof mascara. Sal yells, where's the fucking bum bag, Bee? Where is it? And she's pulling everything out. Tearing the toilet

roll to bits. She won't let me touch her.

We head for the port. Hitching. My foot is fucking killing me. It takes all day to get a lift. We'll get to the port. I have to talk very gently to her. British Embassy or something. We can get temporary passports there, home in a tick. We can beg for money, sing for it, we know how to do that. We'll fucking steal it. We'll go home. I said, everyone's going home now. I have to say this all over again. We'll get home, I say. We'll get back.

We're in a cove. It's not pretty, but there's only one way in and out, and we're holing up here till my foot gets better. We eat sour yoghurt in the mornings, a dollop of honey. Oranges with warmed runny hearts. A bottle of cold coffee so black it looks like motor oil. Great hunks of sweating cheese. Bread that cuts the inside of the mouth, makes us spit blood.

He's out there. We can smell his cigarettes.

Sal's reading a chapter of *Anne of Green Gables* out loud in a French accent. Last night I read *Valley of the Dolls* backwards. I don't remember laughing. We've washed our clothes and dried them hard in the sun.

Through a gap in the rock we can see the ferry arrive and depart each day. It's resting on the sea now, panels glistening. Gliding away.

Sal doesn't want me to write much. She doesn't want me to look down. We've got to wait for our moment and run.

Last night Sal kept watch so I could sleep but I couldn't sleep. I watched her sitting on her ledge, still as a lizard, for hours. My foot is throbbing but I don't tell her how bad it is. She keeps asking me if I'm all right. Yeah, I say, fantastic. Fantastic.

Bee, she says, we can go now. It's night. I feel her hand on my forehead. I'm sweating. Then I hear her voice but it's like it's coming from miles away. What's in the bag, Bee? Cardboard knickers, I say. But it takes me a long time to say that. Keep talking she says. Black dress. Baggy white T-shirt, any old bit of shell necklace . . . Keep talking, she says. So I do, but inside I'm laughing too, because I've thought of a joke I'm going to tell her in the morning. Or the start of a joke. Something I can make funny. Two beautiful sinners, waiting for Jesus to come. ◇



# At least pull your jumper up.

By Bridget O'Connor

HE PUT his key in the lock and the house turned. Clara announced she'd booked the town hall for the thirtieth of July, and if he didn't want to marry her all he had to do was not turn up. He said, you can't do that.

She said, well I have.

He said he was a policeman – he used his policeman voice.

You need ID and I have to be there in person.

She said, I have ID. Your passport and your twin brother.

She wasn't kidding.

She wanted him to commit.

She said, don't do the mute thing.

He said, I am committed. I'm committed to you. To this . . . He gave her his four-minute silence, working his jaw.

She said, I can hear you. I know you're swearing. She pushed her bushy hair (it seemed all one extremely thick strand) behind her ear. Here it came. You think I wanted to live here?

She'd wanted what he called, in his copper shorthand, the works. In no alphabetical order: K for kids, H for hens. G for general green stuff, C for the country. She'd got no and no. And yes to Legoland. They'd got a tall, thin new-build. Open plan. When the front door slammed you could feel it all the way through your hooves. I'm home. He only had a thirty-minute commute. She had an hour and a half either way. He owed her.

He said, we're OK the way we are.

She said, you think? Really?

In bed she pulled out a bridal magazine and began to underline sections using a pink highlighter. Bouquets. Favours. Sash . . .

He laughed it off. It was just one of her ideas.

Clara often had ideas. The ideas would be in the air and then one would bolt for her head. They'd been together thirteen years.

She sent out the invites, embossed.

He laughed it off. He said, it's just one of Clara's . . . She'll never go through with it. His mates said, but seriously, Estonia or Barcelona?

He said, it's just . . . It's her sense of humour. They said, this is going to cost all of us, so stop messing about.

He said, I don't want a stag night, all right?

Clara had a hen night, a week of facials and public vomiting in Paris, via Eurostar. She went dressed as a cat. She was, in fact, a little too stout to be a cat. He didn't hold back, he told her so as she was doing her whiskers, taking off one of her paws.

She said, your suit is hanging up in the wardrobe. I've had a word with Rob. He'll pick you up on the morning of the 31st.

He said, have I not made myself clear?

He said, Clara, you'll look a fool.

She brushed past him, crimping one side of her mouth down. You'll be there.

He boiled over when she left. A week on his own. The house was both noisy and quiet without her, like someone had put an echo CD on. His friends were on his stag do, subsidized by Clara. There goes the kitchen extension.

He said, this is all just some . . . Why?

She said, because . . . because you owe me.

ON THE MONDAY he drank his way through a six-pack and ate from the microwave.

Tuesday was a ditto. In fact ditto till Friday. Friday he decided to treat himself to a takeaway, not a curry or a Chinese. If she could spend their money, so could he. He flipped through the yellow pages and his thumb found DINNER FOR 1. Home-cooked gourmet meals.

Fuck it, he thought, and he showered and changed into his wedding suit. Shiny shoes, no shirt, just his bear-like chest.

In here, he said to the caterer, a tall, pretty girl of forty-eight or so. He showed her the card table he'd set up in front of the TV. She laid out his dinner. She said, I could serve if you like; it's all in. He shrugged.

Just his loud chewing.

And *Taggart*.

She poured him a glass of wine; stood

by with a plate of vegetables in a steaming bag.

When he looked at her she said, don't even ask. But I'll have a drink.

Her name was Tara. She had a PhD in Philosophy, something he knew two things about, he told her. He also knew a joke about a cat. He told her that too. She looked at him and laughed with her head right back, like her head was tilted and he saw all the way down the red pipe of her throat.

She had large hands and the same size feet as him. Are you . . . he said. She sighed before he could finish.

Yes, she was. She held out her hands. These, she said, used to drive a Humvee.

Her real name was Trent.

She had been, until recently, a paratrooper, but was now in process. She said, I'm half the woman I want to be. She said, I've got to stop using that line.

She told him about her operations in Thailand, how she was still in the process of changing her voice.

She talked on. She was living proof, she said, that you can make a silk purse. He didn't get that joke. He pulled out the whisky.

LATER, HE SAID, I don't know what it is but I can really talk to you.

It's because I'm missing my quota of allure and mystique, Tara said. I'm getting that in an injection next week. You can still read me like a bloke. She said, mate, I'm kidding.

There was a long silence while they drank. She could drink like ten men. She did. He was all over the place, spinning at the centre of the room.

Tell us, Tara said, when the room stilled.

What?

You know what?

Jake gave her his deadeye but it didn't have its usual effect.

I don't want to, Jake said. Because he did have something he was saving up for his deathbed, before his final glottal stop. Something he'd been holding back from Clara. It was the thing, the thing he thought about when he wanted to stop her getting in. The dark one. The thing.

He mumbled something about his dad.

Oh, fuck off, said Tara. That's so tired. You turn the TV on and someone has to tell about their dad abusing them or



about something cruel they did to someone's cat. So what was it?

Jake looked at her like she'd robbed him.

Write it down then, Tara said.

I don't wanna, Jake said. All he wanted was to go out on the beat and find someone and just question them for hours. Stare at them over the counter, till

their eyeballs bled and they'd sell their mothers. He got down his spare uniforms.

Okay, Tara said, kicking off her heels, but I get to drive, and the next six hours they were out in the cop car, blue light on, collecting DNA on the motorway, idling in a lay-by, full of twitch and pounce like a louse in a hair line.

DAWN ROSE like a length of streaky bacon. Which was when the horse appeared. No, not a horse, something not fully grown. A white pony, greyish-white, cantering up the wrong side of the motorway, passing the Fiats and the Peugeots and the long hauls, stopping in front of their car, breathing into a bag of sparkling frost.

The mute thing.

Do you see that? Tara said. She put her hand on his arm, squeezed.

Tell.

Jake shook his head.

Write it on the windscreen then.

And Jake did. The words, spelled out in black fly-gore, written under the eye of the horse, were Blind. Old. Lady.

And it was like the blind old lady left his head. Finally.

He'd kept the blind old lady folded up and dirty inside his head, like a manky, twisted and bloody nightie, and whoosh, she was gone, disappearing into the back end of a pony, cantering away into pine forest and mist, and he felt just lighter and better.

I DO, Jake said, the next day. And he did. He would. He will, from now on, whatever the lady wants. Yes.

Yes to anything highlighted in pink. Buttonholes. Favours. Yes to kids and anything beginning with C for commitment, H for hens. And, after last night and a crumpled fender, anything the future brings, even home security. Year of that then B for belly, and too much beef, then club bouncer. Yes to the portable future. Bye to holding hands with Tara/Trent in the revelatory dawn. K for the kiss best forgotten.

Clara, in a dress peaked and icy as egg whites, led up the aisle by his better bet, his reserve, his lifelong spare, Rob, his twin brother, felt a tremor of grief pass up her arm.

Rob loves me, she thought, amazed but unsurprised.

At the altar, or what passed as an altar, a square of fake marble, complete with fake potted orchid, with, she saw like an omen, a fag end crushed in its soil, said after all, after thirteen years of consideration, and a bolt from the blue, with I love Rob too stamped through it like rock, she'd much rather not. ◇

## David Rakoff

The last evening I spent with David Rakoff took place in New York in February this year, on the East Side of Manhattan, in Tudor City, on 43rd Street, at a Japanese restaurant called Soba Totto. We walked there from his nearby apartment, and just before sitting down at the table David asked me to help push up his right sleeve, as a few months before he'd lost the ability to move his left arm. The request was made lightly – he wasn't going to let his cancer dent the conversation – and I helped with the sleeve, and then we sat down to the important business of the evening, which was eating and talking at our table near the yakitori bar, where the cooks tend to the skewers.

The last bit of the previous sentence is from a *New York Times* review of Soba Totto. (It also mentions that 'groups can sometimes score private rooms behind paper doors, pleasant places to spend a sake-soaked evening . . .') I'm not so great at description at the best of times. I've become especially hesitant when it comes to describing dinners or lunches or social events with David in attendance since I first met him in Toronto more than ten years ago, mostly because I know he would undoubtedly remember and convey the details far more vividly. (This is David writing about Collins Avenue, part of Miami's South Beach, in an essay entitled 'Beach Bummers': 'Loose windowpanes rattle in rusty casements, a rainbow flag hangs tattered and proud over an iron balcony, lending the place the battle-scarred dignity of a gay Alamo.'))

I had a hunch, at our evening at Soba Totto, he'd be able to describe me in a way I'd never be able to reciprocate, though I do remember his hair was growing back at that time, and growing back blond. He didn't look gaunt, and he was wearing a leather jacket, which now hung on the back of his chair. I told him he looked handsome and he performed an 'aw, shucks' head dip towards his menu.

For some reason we talked about *Dombey and Son*, and David told me he used to read fat classic novels while doing

an office job during the time he spent in Japan after graduating from Columbia. He had stories of Japan that seemed to be tethered to the different dishes as they arrived, and I could have sat and listened to the stories throughout the dinner (or even to a long passage from *Dombey and Son*) because of David's voice, a true radio voice, and also because most of his stories came out as if they had just been recorded for *This American Life*, the radio show where many of his monologues found a home. Not that he was performing, but rather because he had a deep understanding of the mechanics of retelling, the contours of a story, the pleasure of the understated punchline. And, of course, he knew how important it was to pivot the focus in any conversation to the person on the other side of the table. With my own weak material I tried with to provoke a Rakoff chuckle, a treat for me – the conversational equivalent of green tea ice cream.

A shockingly bad date was unfolding beside us, and although David was giving me his attention, he was the kind of writer who seemed to be alive to the strangeness of his surroundings. If he described the scene it would emerge as a honed comic vignette, and he might incorporate some of the dialogue of the rapacious female half of the date, especially the part when she said slowly, and with foreboding, 'I could just eat you up' to the much younger man across the table. In the restaurant, after hearing that line, I got to witness the great Rakoffian eyebrow raise, a reminder that David was not just a writer, but an actor with impeccable comic timing who just happened to end up playing, in his own words, variations on the following roles: Fudgy McPacker, Jewy McHebrew and even Classy McSophisticate. There was the Oscar-winning short film, *The New Tenants*, which he wrote and starred in, but I didn't hear too much about it, as pushing David out of the realms of modesty took a fair bit of strength. His bio in the third issue of *Five Dials* reads: 'As an actor, he can be seen in

the films *Capote* (fleetingly), and *Strangers with Candy* (fleetingly, mutely).'

Even though David was born in Montreal, he was for me the most un-Canadian of expats. He was so New York, so wrapped in Manhattan. I loved walking the city with him, stepping across his natural terrain. 'Your shoes will stick to the floor here,' he once said when we went in to find a table at Big Wong, a Chinese restaurant on Mott Street, 'but that's no reflection on the food.'

When he wrote in these pages about attending a Woody Allen retrospective, he listed the old rep cinemas of the New York he knew after moving there as a student in the mid eighties – the Regency at 68th, the New Yorker at 88th, the movie house at 72nd and Broadway, the Thalia, 'the Metro, the Bleecker and, of course, Theater 80' – in a way that hinted that these buildings were not just repositories of flickering light. They nurtured whatever you came to New York to become, and, naturally, David was worried about the next set of arrivals that would need New York in a similar way. 'Who is curating the tastes of the city's undergraduates?' he wrote. 'How will they even know about *The Sorrow and The Pity*? *Mondo Cane*? How can the budding homosexual flower bloom without the occasional force-feeding of a double feature of *Now Voyager* and *All About Eve*?' He continues:

To wit – and to extend this parenthetical yet further: in senior year, at the last meeting of our Japanese literature seminar before Spring break, the professor – ageing, erudite, one of the few, perhaps only, Western recipients of countless Japanese cultural laurels – asked us our plans for the coming week. I allowed as how I would be staying in town in order to write my thesis. 'Well then, of course you'll be going to the Bette Davis festival every day down at the Embassy.' He said it as if stating an obvious prescription, like recommending medical attention for a sucking chest wound, or 'You'll want to call the fire department about those flames licking up the front of your house.' Only a self-destructive lunatic would think he could survive the week by missing the Bette Davis festival. I took his advice and went every day.

Did it help my thesis any? Hard to say. It was a long time ago.

Read Rakoff's books – *Fraud, Don't Get Too Comfortable* and *Half Empty* – and the alchemy is evident: the stuff of the world turned into exacting prose; more funny, more droll, and sometimes laced with a righteous cruelty. (I'm thinking of his coruscating description of Barbara Bush.) I don't want to recount his stories today because I can still vividly hear his voice delivering them. I haven't yet turned to the radio archives, the clips. I'm glad they're there. I'll be grasping.

'What did we order, David?' I emailed him in March, after our evening at the Japanese restaurant had, for me, already slipped into the fuzzy outer reaches of my memory.

'Luckily,' he replied, 'we had what I've largely ordered every time: seaweed salad; yaki onigiri (roasted rice balls); skewers of momo (chicken thigh), kawa (chicken skin) and tsukune (ground chicken); kara age (fried chicken); and corn tempura.'

'Do you remember how forward that woman was who was sitting next to us?' I asked.

'I know a woman,' he replied, 'who was making out with a Brit and, being the forward New York broad that she was, she put her hand on the front of his trousers. He interrupted the kiss to proclaim, "Oy loyk Amewican guhlz . . ." (Did I mention he was a chimney sweep in a Pearly King busker costume?)'

I still laugh at that line – I just did – and that was just from a Rakoff *email*. The real high-pleasure yield comes in the books, but even the shortest messages seemed to be assembled with care. Many fans of his writing are quick to say David could make you laugh one moment and cry the next, but there was a much more advanced choreography at work in his writing, as he moved deftly towards each beat of emotion, unafraid to pause in the caesuras, unafraid to reach and deliver the cancer joke of cancer jokes in the stillness he'd created.

'I find writing extraordinarily difficult and not very pleasurable,' David once wrote, 'though I find having done it very pleasurable.' I can almost envision the shavings around his desk. Nothing was thrown away. No email was without a pleasurable twist. His last to me, care-

fully constructed, blamed morphine for the typos, but of course there were none. The previous email had come with an attachment, the manuscript of what will now be his final book, a tale of America told in a series of rhyming couplets. Who the hell writes rhyming couplets in 2012? Who makes glorious use of the overlooked or discarded stuff of the world, makes it generously and genuinely funny?

'Who are you kissing?' he always used to ask me when we met up. (I would respond with tragic tales of my dating life.) A few years ago we sat down for breakfast in an outdoor cafe in Covent Garden. After asking that previous question and listening to my replies, David reached across the table and handed me a wallet made entirely from duct tape – one of his specialities and another example of somehow wringing beauty from the overlooked stuff of the world. They really hold up, the Rakoff duct-tape wallets. They've now been scattered to friends and loved ones all over the world, along with his other craft masterpieces: paper cuts, homemade boxes, miniature chairs made from the curled metal casings that cover champagne corks. I look at these gifts and see a parallel memoir that shares some of the same attributes as his writing: careful construction, embedded humour, each hemmed with love. In Covent Garden we finished our breakfasts. I can't remember what we ordered and can no longer email for clarification. David pointed toward the duct-tape wallet, as if there was something in it, perhaps cash. I opened up the wallet. Inside, written in thin strips of yellow duct tape: 'YOU'RE GAY!'

'I'm not,' I said, laughing. 'You know that.'

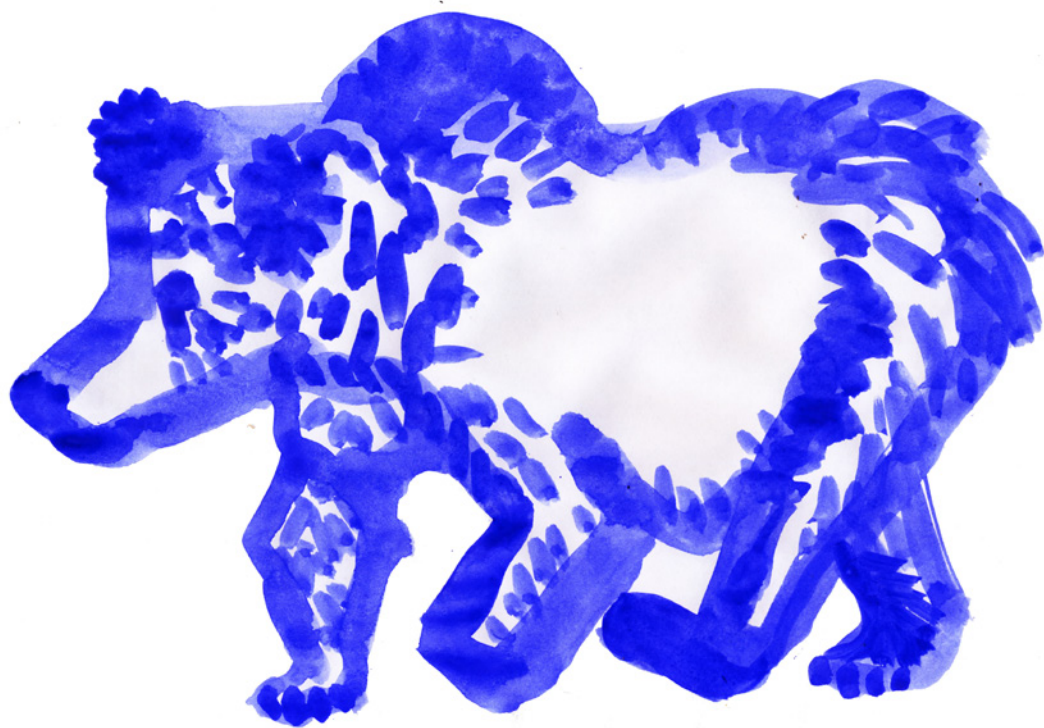
The Rakoff eyebrow.

David spent much of his life writing about himself and his travels, and right now I desperately wish he could take on that Covent Garden sunlight, the eggs – I think it was an omelette he ordered – and the human statues painted silver, and the cobbles, and the Royal Opera House, and the way he chuckled at my reaction as I put the wallet in my bag. It could go further: he could do Soba Tutto too, and write the end of the dinner in February, the scatter of change left as a tip, the chill New York night, the street corner where we said goodbye, my sniffing, numbed cab ride back to Brooklyn. I could

rewrite this farewell to him for a year but working and re-working these words isn't going to make them Rakoffian. I need a different kind of craftsmanship. I feel so clouded, so infuriated by the unfairness of his death. I want him to be afforded one more chance to show me – all of us – just how light his touch could be, what these words could do. The books, the essays, the monologues, the radio work: fine, they survive. But it's hard to refrain from feeling angry. I don't want to be here at this hour, not far from Covent Garden, staring at a screen, re-reading and coralling his words. I don't want to be left cutting and pasting and taking excerpts from his wonderful emails, knowing now that the supply has become finite.

—CRAIG TAYLOR

BLUE BEARS BY NEAL JONES

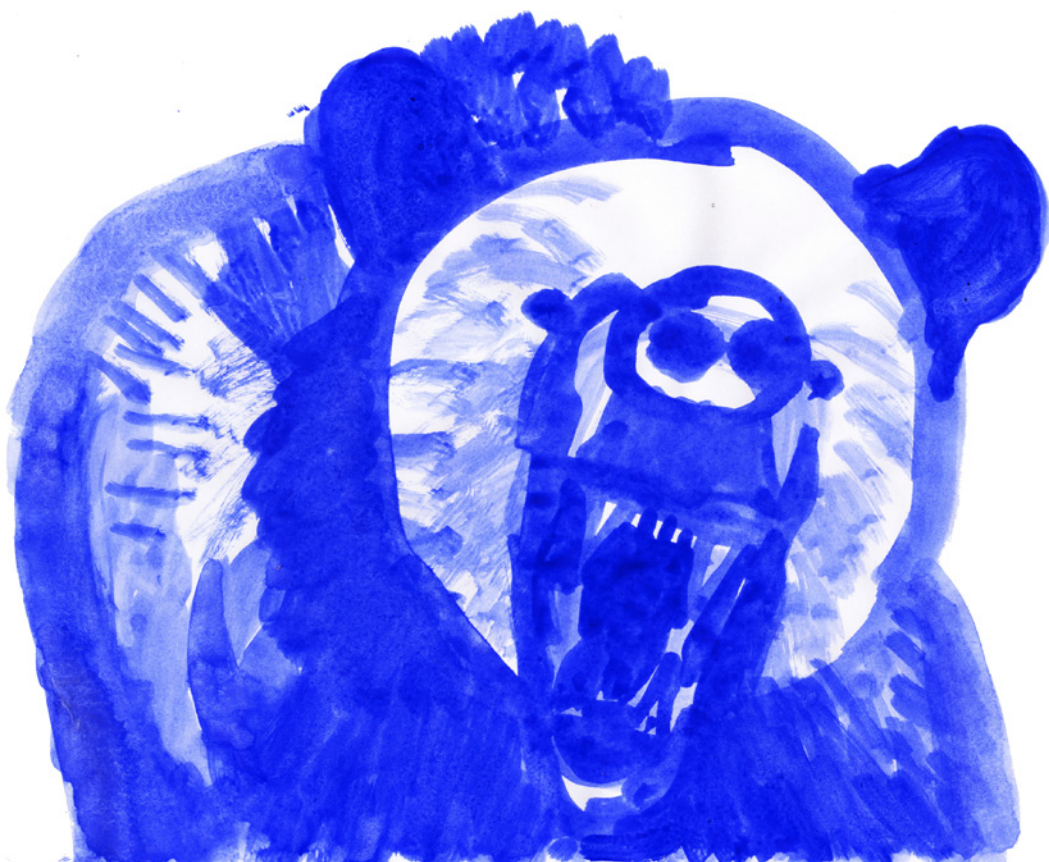


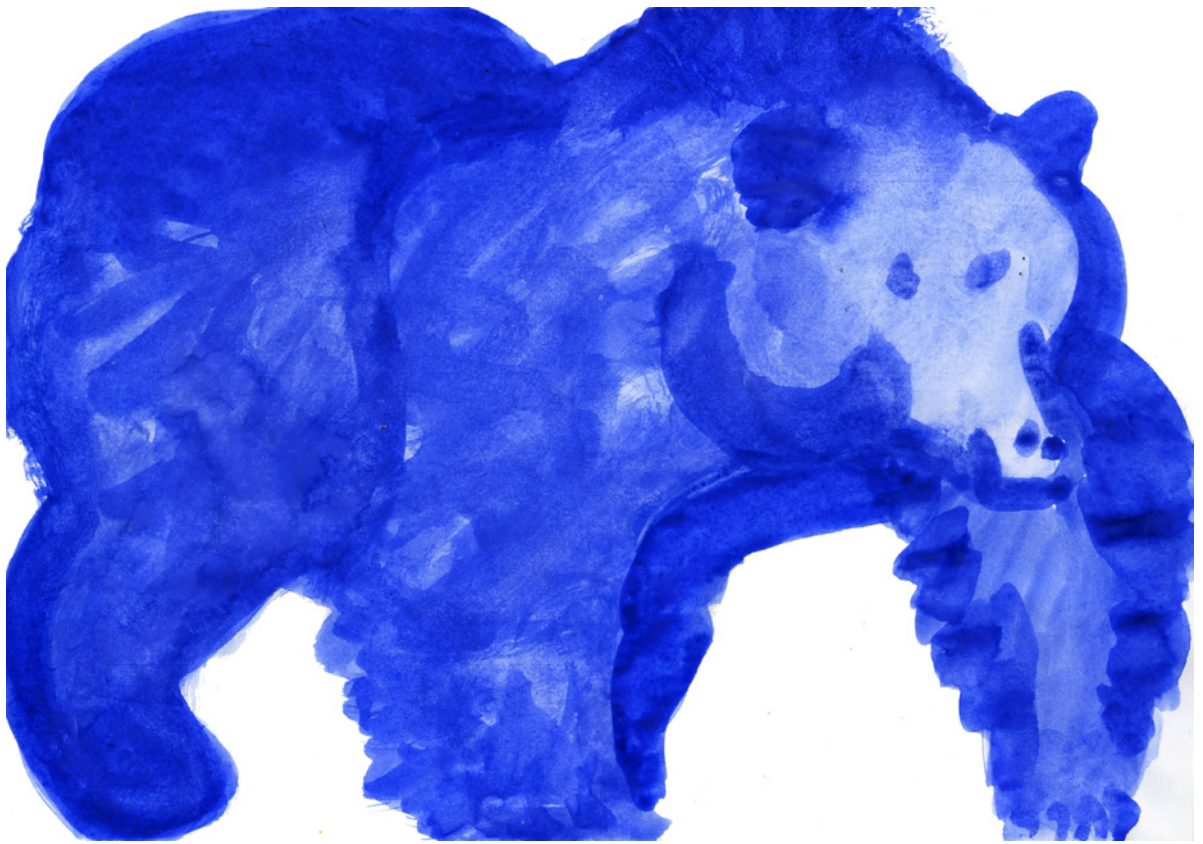














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