

The Comrade Summer

By Peter Deadman

Unlike much of my childhood, the summer I was eleven stands out clear in my memory. It seemed to be hot for months on end. The tarmac oozed as the roses wilted and the cropped grass turned brown. It was the summer I lived on my bike, like a cowboy in the saddle.

Something had happened to me in the spring of that year. Close to the old brick wall at the end of our back garden grew an apple tree. One morning I climbed it and sat on the wall with my head right among the blossom, just as the sun rose over the roofs of our suburban cul-de-sac. I'd never really noticed apple blossom before, with its fragile pinks and whites and secret reds. The sun glowed through the fresh leaves and warmed my face and I was suddenly overwhelmed with a feeling of beauty and peace, an absolute sense of my place in the world and of my life stretching thrillingly before me.

The excitement stayed with me as the long summer holidays began. I would wake hours before my parents, jump into shorts, t-shirt and sandals, and go out into the cool garden to eat my bowl of cereal. Then I would hurry to leave the house before my parents appeared and made everything ordinary.

Most mornings I would cycle to the swimming pool and wait for the doors to open. I loved racing through the empty roads and diving and somersaulting in the echoing pool, and I loved the memory of chlorine that hung on my skin all through the day. I would be back home, with my mother frying eggs, when my father was still in his pyjamas.

"Here he is at last, my fish of a son," my mother would say. "Come and eat," but all I wanted was to drop my wet things and rush back into the sun, to ride up and down the road until Malcolm had finished his chores and would come out the front door of number eight on the other side of the road.

I am in the saddle, one foot on the kerb, the other stretching to the road, rolling back and forth, watching the front tyre score patterns in the black silt of the gutter. It edges closer and closer to the giant stag beetle lying on its back, legs waving feebly. The tyre nudges the beetle, biting at its crisp body.

"Go on then," says Malcolm and gives me a push, and the tyre rolls over the beetle and crushes its shiny, ribbed shell. An orange mess squeezes out.

Malcolm laughs. "That's just what the insides of sea urchins look like," he says. "We saw them in Lloret del Mar last year. They pull out the spines and eat the guts with a spoon while they're still alive. I bet you can eat stag beetles like that."

I shudder. Next to death and nuclear bombs, stag beetles scare me the most, with their great barbed horns and the way they suddenly take off and clatter unpredictably through the air.

"Beat you," I say, and standing on the pedals I race to the green, the oval patch of grass that forms the bulb end of the cul-de-sac. The green is small and the turns are tight; take them too fast and you skid. Our bare knees are always scabbed from grating on the gravelled road.

When we get tired of racing we go down the alley, an unpaved track that winds round the back gardens of the houses, past the wooden fences and gates that smell of creosote in the hot sun. Nobody else ever seems to come down here and it's heavy with the scent of greenery, and hot and still but for the buzzing of insects and the distant grumble of a lawn mower. On the side of the track opposite the gardens is a crumbling brick wall. Here there are wild patches with clumps of hot stinging nettles full of caterpillars, and dark corners piled with bottles and rags and rusting cans.

We throw our bikes down and start picking caterpillars off the nettles and putting them in a dirty glass jar.

"Hey look," I hear Malcolm say.

It's a dead thrush. When I turn it over with a stick I can see the crawling maggots and a sweet, rotten smell pours off it.

"That's what happens when you die," says Malcolm. "Your eyeballs burst and the maggots and worms crawl in and out of the sockets. They try and make the coffins so thick the worms can't get in, but it never works."

"It's much better if they burn you," I say, half-remembering something I've heard.

There's a silence then Malcolm says, "How can you be resurrected if you're just a pile of ash?"

"I don't know," I say, suddenly on shaky ground.

There's a lot I don't know. Not long before school broke up, Mrs Bailey asked our class to tell her what was special about next Saturday. Everyone but me thrust their hands to the ceiling.

"Don't you know what day it is Daniel?" she said.

I felt my face getting red.

"Tell him Amanda," and Amanda Eggerton, sitting next to me, said, "It's the Queen's official birthday miss," and everyone turned and stared.

I'm always denying things too, like when Savidge came up to me in the playground and said, "You're a jewboy aren't you."

"Your dad's a Communist," says Malcolm.

"No he isn't," I say.

Malcolm is a year older than me and goes to the grammar school where my dad teaches maths.

"He's a Commie," says Malcolm, "Everybody knows. I don't care though. I don't even know what it means. My father says they should all be shot."

"It means everyone should be equal," I say quickly. "The working class are the best because they make things. And Russians. And black people in America are good. There shouldn't be rich people or poor people, everything should be shared out the same."

Malcolm looks at me. "So can we share your bike then?" he says.

I try to laugh but my face won't move. I look down at my red bike lying on its side, shining in the sun, the bike I waited for so long and finally got for my birthday two months ago, the bike I still polish and oil and grease nearly every day.

"Only joking," he says. "Let's make a fire."

Malcolm always has matches and caps and cap guns and bangers, even when it's nowhere near November.

We tear the labels off old tin cans and scrunch them up and pile twigs on top. Then we light it and squat either side watching it burn. Once we made a fire close to the wooden fence and you can still see the scorch mark.

"The school I was at before," says Malcolm, "There was this boy Dimmock who blew two of his fingers off playing with fireworks."

We're back in the road, doing nothing, sitting on the kerb in the sun when I hear my mother calling.

"Daniel, Daniel, it is eating time."

I wish she wouldn't do that but I can't stop her; she sounds so foreign and stupid with her Russian accent and everyone in the road can hear her.

"Sorry," I say to Malcolm.

My mother is always trying to feed Malcolm but he's not allowed to eat with us. He has to make his own lunch and wash everything up afterwards. His mother doesn't go out to work but she lies down a lot during the day.

I park my bike, the tyre tight against the kerb, and run inside our cool house that all this summer has smelled of paint as my father, wearing his old army shorts, has whistled his way round the windows and doors.

"Can I take it outside?" I say.

"No. Go and wash your hands, top to bottom," my mother says.

"Please," I say, and I'm already out the door with the triangles of sandwich and a dill pickle. I ride down the road, as far as the green, then sit and eat them in the saddle.

My parents don't allow guns or television. At four o'clock Malcolm and I go to his house, which is full of dark wood and smells of polish.

Malcolm's house has fitted carpets. When he opens the front door with the key that hangs on a woven leather strap clipped to his belt, his mother is already standing in the hall.

"Shoes," she says, and Malcolm has to change into his slippers. As I take my shoes off I see that my socks have holes in them.

"Please may we watch television?" Malcolm says to his mother.

We can watch children's television in the sitting room but only Malcolm's mother can open the shiny doors of the wooden cabinet and switch it on. We sit on the carpet with Malcolm's guns and shoot the Indians who leap out on the Lone Ranger and Tonto as they ride through rocky passes.

My dad was an athlete and a boxer at university. Malcolm's father is big and fat. His head is shiny and he has a ginger moustache and a red face. His stomach pokes out of the khaki cardigan with leather buttons he always wears at home. On weekdays he wears a suit and spends ages fussing with his Morris Traveller before squeezing himself into it and driving off. Malcolm says he's in insurance.

"It was eight years before he would so much as nod his head to us," my mother often complains. "He would never have opened his mouth if he hadn't had to eat his humble pie and talk to your father about Malcolm at Parents' evening."

Malcolm's father builds miniature steam engines in his shed and when he's in a good mood we can go and watch them working, the brass pistons pumping away, red-painted wheels spinning. The rest of the time the shed is padlocked.

He comes in when the pistol shots are ricocheting through the valley and says, "Turn that thing down." Then he sits in his armchair and reads the Daily Express.

"Bloody trouble makers," he says, "Ought to be rounded up," and Malcolm's mother who is passing in the hall says, "Gordon, shush."

We are Communists and we read the Daily Worker. Some Saturdays I go out with my dad, delivering it to party members. We walk up front paths that look just the same as everyone else's but I know the people in these houses are comrades and are different. Some of them are foreign, with thick accents like my mother's. Others, usually in smaller houses on the estate, are what are called the proletariat like Dick, one of my dad's best friends. He's a bus driver and always lets us off at the end of our road, even though there's no bus stop there. Anyway, we never just push the paper through the letter boxes of these houses but have to ring the bell and then my father stands on the doorstep and talks for ages and ages.

They meet in our house in the evenings. Sometimes I sit at the top of the stairs in my pyjamas. Mostly they all talk at once, but the one voice I hear clearly is my dad's. When he talks everyone goes quiet, maybe because he's a teacher, and even when there's long pauses and I know he's fussing with his pipe, they wait to hear what he has to say about people like Krushchev and Stalin, and the Labour party. The smell of his pipe tobacco fills the house and gets right into my bedroom.

Other evenings we sit together in the living room. Sometimes my mother, who used to be a concert pianist, plays the piano and we stand around and sing Scottish songs like Over the Sea to Skye. Or we listen to records. All of us like Paul Robeson because he's black and a Communist and is treated badly by the Americans, but my dad likes opera best. In fact he likes opera so much that he's wired up speakers all round the house so he can hear it even when he's in the toilet. He plays it so loud that Mrs Bouvier from next door keeps complaining.

"I really must draw your attention once again to your music," she says. "It's far too loud. I've asked you before. Especially on Sunday mornings."

When she's gone, I prance round the room with my chest puffed up and my nose in the air, and say, "It's far too loud, I must complain," and my parents laugh.

Just there, next to the broken paving stone, is where Malcolm hit the kerb, face first.

We were racing round the green and he'd got in front. Whenever I tried to get past, he'd block me. I know I clipped the back of his wheel but I didn't mean to. There was blood and bits of white tooth coming out of his mouth and he lay there without moving and with his left arm twisted. A builder who was working on the roof of number seventeen came down the ladder really fast. He got Malcolm up and kept saying, "You're all right lad, you're all right," and Malcolm started crying so loudly I was scared. Mrs Stokes came out with a tea towel and the builder held it to Malcolm's mouth as he helped him over to number eight and rang the bell. Malcolm was cradling his arm. I saw Malcolm's mother white faced at the open door.

There was a small crowd of people now and someone said they'd called an ambulance. Mrs Stokes, who is old and smells sour, like she doesn't wash much, came up to me as I was standing to the side.

"It was you," she said. "You knocked into him."

"No I didn't," I said. "He skidded."

"You brought him down," said Mrs Stokes. "I know your sort."

I felt my face grow hot and I ran home, leaving my bike lying in the road. My mother was in the kitchen holding on to the washing machine that always juddered across the floor when it was on spin. I told her what had happened, with my face pressed into her apron. I didn't tell her it was my fault though as she stroked my hair and called me 'bubeleh'.

I didn't see Malcolm for several days. I kept to the house and the back garden. I was terrified that Mrs Stokes would say something to Malcolm's parents.

A few days later my mother and I were walking down the front path on our way shopping for new school clothes. She was behind me as usual, thumping my shoulders with her hand to get rid of the dandruff and stray hairs. I saw Malcolm's father walking over, his face redder than ever.

"You kids need to be a bit more careful on those bikes of yours," he said, and then to my mother, "You want to keep an eye on him."

The next time I saw Malcolm he had stitches on his forehead, a bruise right down one side of his face and his left arm in plaster up to the elbow.

"You can still see my blood on the pavement," he said and grinned. There was a gap where one of his front teeth was missing.

"Do you want to play down the alley?" I said.

"I can't," he said.

The holidays seemed to last forever and then suddenly they were over. I had brand new everything – blazer, cap, coat, pencil case, satchel, all smelling fresh from the shop. I wished I was going to the school that Malcolm went to; we could have gone on our bikes. But because my dad taught there I had to go to a different one that was two bus rides away and where I didn't know anyone.

When I got home that first day I dropped my bag and blazer in the hall and went into the kitchen to make a cheese and honey sandwich. It was one of my mother's weird mixtures that I always pretended I didn't really like.

I could hear my parents talking in the sitting room with the door closed, which was strange as my father always got home much later than me. I went in. My father was sitting in the armchair and my mother was on the arm of the chair with her hand on his head. I'd never seen him cry before. I stood there furiously concentrating on twisting and turning the sandwich to stop the honey dropping on the floor till my mother told me to go out into the garden. My father had been suspended. They said he'd been using his maths classes to spread Communism.

Dick came round the next day when we were having breakfast with a copy of the Wickham Advertiser folded to the letters page.

"You've got to bloody hear this," he said. "Dear Sir. Most right-minded people will be shocked to hear that Communism is rife in our local schools. Our children are being indoctrinated by the very people who are supposed to teach them right and wrong.' Then he says we should all write to our MPs – that's a joke – and it's signed Gordon Simmonds. Isn't he that neighbour of yours?"

Though the letter didn't mention my father, there was a short piece on the front page saying how he'd been suspended and everyone could work it out.

The comrades rallied round. They came to share their outrage and the cakes and pots of food they'd made. I got my hair ruffled and my cheek pinched more than ever. Some of the neighbours were all right too; people he'd lent his lawnmower to or whose kids he'd helped with maths. But others, like Mrs Stokes, crossed to the other side of the road whenever they saw us. Mrs Bouvier next door turned her head and went back into the house and shut the door if any of us went out into the back garden. If Mr Bouvier didn't follow her, she'd stand at the kitchen door calling him in with her shrill voice.

I know my father tried hard to appear normal but he'd stopped whistling and he didn't play opera any more. A reporter from the paper came to the house to interview him, "so you can put your case," but my father wouldn't speak to him. When the reporter rang for the third time my mother took the call and said, "He doesn't want to talk to anyone; he would rather pull his leg off," and slammed the phone down.

The night before his hearing with the school board he went out for a long walk.

"Your father is very worried," my mother said.

"What happens if he doesn't get his job back?"

"It will kill him," she said.

I went out and sat on the wall at the end of the garden. There were only a few apples and most of them were wrinkled and small.

"I think it's going to be all right," my father told us when he came back from the hearing. "They've done the whole thing properly. They spoke to all my kids with their parents present, and none of them said they'd heard me talk about anything except maths and opera. It was Malcolm's father who made the complaint. The Head told me after the hearing that he'd turned up on the first day of term demanding that Malcolm be dragged out of his lesson and they sat in the Head's study and Malcolm's father kept saying, 'tell him Malcolm,' and Malcolm didn't look up once and just mumbled into the carpet that I was always going on about how the people would rise up and overthrow capitalism."

"I never say things like that even in my own house," said my father, though I was pretty sure he did. "Anyway I'm sure it's all going to be OK."

But it wasn't. The letter came two days after the hearing. They had the highest opinion of his teaching, the governors said, but the school had come under a lot of pressure and their responsibility was to be seen to do whatever was necessary to restore its reputation. Reluctantly they had decided they weren't able to give him his job back. They would, however, provide excellent references and they were sure he would be made welcome at another school.

It didn't kill my father, of course, but he wasn't ever quite the same. He was very proud and he'd never really failed at anything before. But it was my mother who seemed to take it the worst. I remember sitting upstairs in my bedroom, doing my homework, hearing her shouting at my father that she should never have come to this horrible country and why had he brought her to a place filled with such cold stuck-up people. She was yelling so loud I was sure the Bouviers must have heard. Six months later we moved house when my father got a job as head of maths in a big north London comprehensive school.

I only remember seeing Malcolm once after that, though I must have done. I suppose he just became somebody I didn't know any more.

I was cleaning my bike on the pavement outside our house. I'd turned it upside down and taken the chain off and laid it in a white enamel pan that I'd filled with pink paraffin. I was scrubbing the black grease off with an old toothbrush when I saw Malcolm come out of his house and hang about his gate. Then I heard him walk over.

I didn't look up though I could see his legs. He shuffled from foot to foot and kicked at a few bits of gravel.

"What are you doing?" he said.

I didn't say anything.

"Shall I get my bike for a bit? My parents are out."

I stood up.

"That time you smashed your face on the kerb and broke your arm," I said.

"That's all right," he said quickly.

"It was my fault," I said.

"I know," he said. "But you didn't mean to."

"I did mean to," I said. "I did it on purpose and I'm glad you got smashed up," and I lifted my bike and carried it through into the back garden. Then I came back for the pan and emptied the paraffin, black now, into the gutter where it flowed through the dark silt and down the drain grating, down amongst the gum wrappers and cigarette ends and wooden ice lolly sticks.

**WARNING: THE FOLLOWING TEXT CONTAINS STRONG AND
OFFENSIVE LANGUAGE**

White Pudding Supper

By Vicki Jarrett

It's been mad in here today. I've not even had time to stop for anything to eat myself. I don't really mind. Breathing in the smell of chips all day, it puts me right off. But see when you're hungry enough, there's something in that hot fat smell that gets right down your neck, just wraps itself round your guts and tugs. Same for anyone. If you leave it long enough, the hunger just takes over. But I missed lunch as well and I can get a bit nippy when I'm hungry which is not the best idea for what's coming.

I break a stray wing of crispy batter from the edge of a fish and pop it in my mouth when Dino goes through the back for the sausages, then have to turn away and swallow quickly when he reappears. Eating behind the counter is absolutely Not On, and most especially not from any of the stuff on display.

We're stocking the hot cabinets, me and Dino. Mental hour is about to start. You'll have heard of happy hour in the pubs? Well this is nothing like that. Everything's the same price it always is, just the customers are all mental cases. Not in the usual walking around like a normal person with a job and a family while being secretly mental kind of way, but really properly mad, enough to have to stay in the hospital. What most folk, least of all the mental cases themselves, don't appreciate is that they're the lucky ones. Mostly they're in there because someone is bothered enough about them to see they get locked up safely, instead of just leaving them lying in a pool of blood and sick in some doorway like they're not even human. If you've nowhere to go and no one to care, you've got to be a murderer or worse before you'll get a safe bed for the night.

The cases we get down here are bad enough to be in hospital but not scary enough to have to keep the doors locked all the time. So every Thursday at 6pm, they're allowed out to trail down the road in ones and twos and come in here to us. Sometimes I feel like a social worker or something, probably do more good than most of those arseholes, all those Fiona's with their scarves and their earrings, and their 'self esteem' and 'opening up' bollocks. If I had real problems, which I don't ok, the last person I'd want to talk to is a social worker. The very last person. You'll not get your dinner off any of them either.

I'm starting to feel a bit spaced out with hunger as I line up the scotch eggs and pies and I'm thinking about how my head sometimes feels a bit like a scotch egg. All scratchy and dry on the outside, then all this soft mashed up meat underneath, and then right in the middle, a perfect egg. But the egg is trapped and no one will ever see how perfect it is because all that meat is pressed around it and it's shelled up with breadcrumbs so no light can get in or out and colours like white and yellow don't matter, they don't even exist.

My mate Gordon comes in. He's not my boyfriend, nothing like that, but we sometimes go out drinking and dancing, there's no law against it. He wants to know if I'm coming out tonight after my shift. I'd like to. A few beers would go down just nice but I don't get paid till tomorrow and don't have any money. Gordon says he'll sub me but I say no. Even when you're mates, if you let a guy buy you stuff, it gives them ideas, like they're owed something back at the end of the night and things can get nasty if you don't want to pay up. So now I always take my own money, safer that way. Me and Gordon stand outside the shop and smoke a cigarette together but I have to get back to work straight away. Gordon goes off in a huff. He doesn't say anything but he's got his hands pushed hard down into his pockets so I can tell he's not happy. Doesn't matter though, he's not my boyfriend or anything. I lift the hatch in the counter and go back to the staff side, close it behind me and flick the snib along.

The mental cases are harmless enough, once you get used to them. There's the guy that mutters all the time, just a string of swear words and filth, but his order will be in there too so you have to listen to all of it really carefully. Some of it'd make your hair stand on end, but there it'll be, hiding amongst all the fucks and bastards, a little 'sausage supper, just salt,' and even a 'please, ya dirty hoor.' Then there's the Snow White couple who look like brother and sister, both with pure white skin, rosy cheeks and lips so red it's like they must be wearing lipstick but

they're not. They tiptoe up to the counter holding hands, stroking and reassuring each other, whispering their order and never looking anyone in the eye. The drooling man took a bit of getting used to. He just stares into nowhere with his mouth hanging open, a long thread of gluey dribble hanging from his lower lip and going down all the way to the floor without breaking. He shuffles forwards, his feet hardly leaving the ground and blubs out his order like a zombie, like someone else who's not even there is working his mouth for him. When he hands over the money it lands in my hand in slimy wet coins and I have to try hard not to look grossed out and just drop the coins in a paper cup next to the till for rinsing out later.

Anyway, I'm used to all of them now, and they don't faze me, I just get on with it. Live and let live. These folk have got enough shite in their lives. Tonight though, after the regulars, there's one I haven't seen before and I can tell straight away he's something different. He has patchy burnt-looking ginger hair and a beard to match and there's old yellow bruises on his face, but it's his eyes that bother me. They're black and he doesn't blink, just stares straight at me from the moment he comes in the shop and when he gets close, I can see behind them, like looking through smoked glass. It's like every strong feeling you could ever imagine having, and some you've only ever heard about, are all drunk and partying hard in the front room of his head. I can see them all right there, fucking and fighting, crying and laughing and one figure in the middle of it all stands with his arms spread out on either side and his head flung back, covered in white fire, burning, screaming and burning.

He asks for a white sausage supper, salt and sauce on it, hands me the money. I give him his dinner wrapped in two layers of newspaper along with three pound change. 'I gave you a twenty' he says, his voice like a knife. Some of the party animals behind his eyes stop what they're doing and stare out at me, like they're interested to know if they'll have to jump in.

'No,' I check the notes at the top of the till, there's no twenties, just an old crumpled five, 'that was definitely a fiver you gave me.' His face starts to change colour, blood rising up from under the old bruises, and his eyes are straining out of his head and suddenly there's a loud bang that makes all the pies in the hot cabinet jump. He's kicked the counter, just lashed out with his foot without taking his eyes from mine. The bang's so loud I'm wondering if he's wearing steel toe-capped boots. Has to be or he'd have broken something, he kicked out that hard. Dino comes out from the back of the shop wiping his hands on his apron.

'What's going on here?' he asks looking between me and the mental case for an explanation.

'This little bitch is trying to cheat me is what's going on here! I gave her a twenty and she's pocketed it or something and is trying to fob me off with three quid, saying I only gave her a fiver.'

Dino looks at me, raises his eyebrows. He knows me well enough, so doesn't believe the guy for a second but his expression tells me we have to be careful and find a way of calming the guy down, or at least getting him out of the shop. Opening the till, Dino makes a show of poking through the contents, even looking underneath the grubby fiver. 'No mate, sorry, you must be mistaken, there are no twenties in here. I emptied the till myself just five minutes ago and there are none in here now so you can't have given her one.'

The guys just explodes. 'Fuck you! Fuck you! Fuck you both!' Spit flies from his mouth and he starts kicking the counter again, both feet this time, one after another, bang bang bang.

Then he's jumping up and trying to reach over the counter towards me. I'm not sure if he's trying to grab me or hit me and I'm not keen to find out so I move sideways to get behind the hot cabinets. He follows me round on the other side but he's no hope of getting at me there since the cabinets are as tall as he is. Still, he's jumping up and pulling himself up on them. I can see his face through the greasy glass, all stretched and mad looking, reflecting off the sides of the case like his head's actually inside it, wedged between the onion rings and the jumbo burgers, his eyes glowing red and black like little round coals .

He starts in with his feet again. One of the panels on the customer side has been loose for ages. Dino keeps sticking big wads of blu tac behind it to keep it in place until it gets fixed properly but it can't stand up to this kind of treatment, tips forward and lands on the tiled floor with a hard crack, exposing the back of the deep fat fryers. The mental case looks like he can't believe his luck and starts laying into the stainless steel tanks with his feet, each kick making a deep booming noise. The hot fat inside the fryers leaps and splashes up from the open side next to me.

The attack on his fryers is too much for Dino. He lifts the hatch and moves around the counter, taking the guy by the elbow and saying firmly, 'OK, pal, time to go. Come on, out.' He steers him out of the shop quickly before he knows what's happening and when he does figure out what's going on and swings back round to push through the door again, Dino slams it shut and flings the latch so he's locked out. This really pisses him off and he shouts at the door for a while then takes a step back and to the side, opens the newspaper wrapper on his white pudding

supper and starts picking chips out and chucking them hard as he can at the plate glass window. They bounce off leaving little splodges of brown sauce steaming on the glass. Dino waves him away but this just makes him even more angry. He grabs the white pudding and starts battering it against the window, all the while shouting.

'Bitch bitch bitch stole my money my fucking money my fucking money bitch burn you'll burn you'll fucking burn in hell for this thieving fucking bitch.'

Dino looks at me. Neither of us knows whether to laugh or be scared or both. The pudding is holding up pretty well considering how hard it's been whacked off the glass but after a while bits of fatty oatmeal start flaking off and sticking to the window, looking like bits of brain and the whole pane is shaking in its frame. Dino frowns and says, 'Think I better phone the police.'

They must have been close by because it's only a couple of minutes before two of them show up in a meat wagon. By this time the guy has gone through the whole pudding, greyish lumps of it are sliding down the window leaving greasy trails. He's screwed up and thrown the empty wrapper and looks like he's squaring up to stick the head on the window instead when one of the boys in blue collars him from behind and marches him into the waiting van.

Dino lets his pal in to the shop and gives him a few chips while he asks us what it was all about. He nods and he tells us this isn't the first time they've taken this guy in for pulling the same trick. 'He's from the mental hospital up the road,' he tells us 'and we know the hospital only ever gives them a fiver at most. Any more and they'll do something stupid, like buy booze or take a bus to somewhere and have to be brought back. Last time we picked him up he was trying to get on the overnight coach to Newcastle by holding the driver at gun point, only it wasn't a gun he had, it was a potato. And not a very big one at that. Poor sod.'

The rest of the evening is pretty dull. Dino puts the counter back together and cleans the window and we shut up shop. As I head down the road it starts to rain and the wind blows it right in my face. I pull my collar up and try to squeeze my head down between my shoulders. I'm thinking about the mental case with the white pudding supper and how he's probably nice and dry and warm by now in the day room, someone making him a cup of tea and asking if he wants to talk about it.

I phone Gordon when I get in. 'You still going to the club tonight?'

'Yeah,' he says still sounding a bit huffy but I can tell he'll get over it quick enough. 'I thought you were skint.'

'Well, I am but I think I'll come out for a few anyway. See you in half an hour.'

Round the back of the fire station, the neon club sign blurs red into the rain as I walk under it, Disco Inferno in big letters and a chalk board by the door reading 'Happy Hour 9 to 10pm'. Just made it. A bouncer with a shaved head and no neck, more fat than muscle, asks me for the entrance money. I reach into my back pocket and pull out a crisp twenty and hand it to him. I'm going to burn alright.

John and John

By Toby Litt

WARNING: THE FOLLOWING TEXT CONTAINS STRONG AND OFFENSIVE LANGUAGE

..allowing your eyes gently to close, said the soft voice in John's head, and then now starting to bring your awareness into this present moment, the voice which was coming into his head through the white bud-earphones, because we're going to centre this first meditation upon the breath, a male voice, Californian, he thought, probably Californian, a slightly gay, droopy, insinuating voice, but only mildly gay and only vaguely insinuating, after all, the voice telling him what to do was telling him what to do for his own good, he had chosen to listen to it, and the pillows and cushions under his bum weren't giving quite enough support, his double-backed legs tucked to either side weren't getting enough blood and there was the spot on his back that needed squeezing. John began to wonder how some men ended up with gay voices – even men who weren't gay, or, quite often, who didn't think themselves gay even though everybody but their mothers knew they were gay as gay could be. His left knee was going to start to ache and then to stab – he knew that, he knew it for certain. The instructor or meditation guide or guru had already counselled his listeners, both present at the original recording session and anticipated through tape and compact disc and podcast – had already advised them to find some comfortable and stable position in which to sit, either cross-legged or squatting down, on a cushion (as John was, on a pile of cushions on a bed) or on a chair (as John might have found more comfortable, though more humiliating, with his going-to-be-arthritic-one-day going-to-be-really-painful-today knee). The easy, relaxed, trademark competence of the calm gay voice annoyed John, and made him want to open his eyes, twirl his finger around the off-white donut-shape of the iPod click wheel and then push the central select button for ACDC or The Ramones or Napalm Death – anything to fuck up this false striving for a calm he would probably never achieve and did he really want it anyway? Calm was uncreative. Writers who went zen all went gooey and rubbish – look at Christopher Isherwood – so why did he think calm was something he needed? The calm gay meditation voice was bringing him back, reminding him not to let himself be distracted by stray or irrelevant thoughts. The breath – stay with the breath. He always thought of the owner of the calm gay voice as Christopher – partly because of Christopher Isherwood and partly because of Christopher Street in New York. He tried to stay simply with the breath, but whenever he started a meditation, he always envisaged one after the other several things: the Edinburgh Book Festival, the white tents in which the Edinburgh Book Festival was held, the square within which the tents were pitched, Henri Bergson, Henri Bergson's concept of duration (which he had been reading the last time he attended the Edinburgh Book Festival) and the hotel room in which he had sat on the bed, during that last Edinburgh Book Festival, not quite as he was kneeling on this hotel bed now, and had first listened to the newly bought compact disc of A Beginner's Introduction to Meditation. These thoughtforms always broke up his first few moments of strived-for-serenity, even though he shouldn't be striving. And then always followed the image of the young woman he'd almost not slept with after his event that year at the Edinburgh Book Festival – how close he'd come to missing out on that dip in the back above the bum, those shifting-lifting haunches, that sweet introductory blow-job, those droop-free breasts – after which, until his second climax, all the sex had been anti-climax. The whole passage of these images – from tents to breasts – took only a few seconds, and then John was back in the ambience of the faraway recording session, listening to Christopher's voice of gay calm. Back because this was one of his favourite bits, if he could be said to have favourite bits – when Christopher referred to thoughts and memories and plans going on in the mind, and then said, matter-of-fact, gay or not gay, this is the stuff of your life. John liked that phrase so much that he always intended to remember it so that he could write it down after finishing meditating. But he always forgot, distracted by his subsequent distractions – of which there were always many. He wanted to steal that phrase, the stuff of your life, use it as a title for a story or a chapter. Stuff suggested stuffing, of sofas, of chickens, of women. There was something

satisfactory and true in the dismissiveness of the phrase. Your life – Christopher seemed to be saying – is not the stuff in it but your life is largely comprised of stuff. And stuff can be dealt with – taped up in cardboard boxes and sent off for storage. John was aware of his thoughts as being thoughts, and of them being intrusive to the point of ruining the meditation. But he was vain of them, too. There was a conceit of intellect, like the stylistic conceit of leaving a Latinate word in a written sentence even though the Anglo-Saxon is more direct and more subtle. But John preferred his prose a little conceited. Flaubert, James, Joyce, Nabokov. Self-admirers. Fingernail-gazers. Christopher the Californian now told John to become aware of what is going on all around you, particularly the sounds. He said to accept them with attention, patience and lovingkindness – not to attempt to challenge or oppose them, but merely to let them figure in your consciousness until your consciousness becomes bored of them and lets them drop. Which it will. And suddenly there was a white woman, a redhead, on her knees, sucking a long black cock – it was an image from the interracial pornfilm he had watched on the hotel television, half an hour ago, after checking in, before showering. He had masturbated for the five minutes it took until ejaculation. As always, he had swallowed his come. It was a trick he'd learnt in boarding school, after lights out, when gentle slappings and squishings could be heard from many of the surrounding beds. Catch the spunk in the foreskin – a bit might go on the sheets if you weren't quick enough, but that didn't matter, it wasn't their mothers who were going to be washing them. Then, ease the off-white goo into the cleft between thumb and clenched forefinger. Hope there wasn't too much, or it wasn't too runny with pre-come. Knock it back as, years later, he would swallow his first raw oyster – and realise the sensation was entirely bizarrely familiar. A very big black cock, uncircumcised, with a pink bell-end that – when exposed – looked the colour black flesh does when third-degree-burned or napalmed. As the porn actress mock-lovingly tugged the foreskin along the shaft, the pink appeared and disappeared – then it disappeared into her by-contrast dully pink-grey mouth, only to reappear and disappear, slippery, slimy. John came long before the black porn actor – in fact, he'd turned the television off before that moment of no doubt humiliatingly extravagant gush. As if the size of the black cock itself hadn't been humiliating enough. The black cock must have been eight or nine inches long, and wide, too – although slightly flaccid-looking at times. An entirely stereotypical, racist version of a black cock – long, thick. John was not meditating. He was failing comprehensively to meditate. He was not planning or thinking, but instead he was remembering a thick black cock being fellated. He listened to the next words of Christopher's calm gay voice, which were letting the awareness gently rest on the breath. Always the breath, always the fucking breath. But now another thing happened which always happened when John was meditating, or trying to meditate, or trying and failing to meditate: the mention of the breath made him realise he was breathing – that he had a body, with lungs and other squishy internal organs – organs that could be damaged or become cancerous – and that his breathing-body would, one day, perhaps today, perhaps right now this moment, die and be dead not stop being dead. Breath meant death, like any boy or master at his school with halitosis: death-breath. John felt his heart start to beat more intensely, and this reminder of the fact that one of his internal organs was something as fragile and long-suffering long-serving as a meaty muscular heart was added to the breath-of-death thought. Far from calming him, the injunction to rest gently on the breath was making him believe he was about to start having a heart attack – he couldn't rest on the breath, the breath wouldn't support him, it was breath, he wasn't a feather, he would fall not float, and land hard, spilling his internal organs sideways, and die, and be and remain dead. If he stopped breathing, he would die. And if he lived, he would grow old and get arthritis, especially in his left knee – probably first of all in his left knee, because that's what was starting to really hurt now, ignore it as he tried. And although Buddhism wasn't mentioned any more than passingly on this tape, John now thought the words The Buddha The Buddha. This was a non-denominational, secular meditation tape – probably so as not to offend, or so as to be purchasable by American Christians, stressed ones, stressed about Jesus sending them to hell on judgement day because they'd done something evil that no-one had ever flagged up to them as evil. The Buddha The Buddha – and John thought about the Buddha himself, and the Buddha was two Buddhas simultaneously: the thin youngish Buddha achieving enlightenment beneath a tree in Northern India or Southern Nepal and also the fat laughing Buddha that a friend of John's had once had, when they were ten years old, the Buddha as garden statuary, a little green with lichen, brought inside and established on an altar on a bedside cabinet from MFI. The Buddha knew that minds were full of obscene crap, and that the way to discipline them was to meditate, by staying with the breath-that-meant-death but death wasn't so bad for the Buddha because, fat and thin, he realised that there's no such thing as actual death, although hearts stop and lungs turn black and hard and stop working, and John – who hadn't smoked for five years, apart from occasionally, when in pursuit of a woman – suddenly thought of a cigarette in his mouth, cushioned against

his top and bottom lip, and how perfect it would feel, the smoke tubing out of it, far better than this attempt at being a Buddha in a hotel room. What had reminded him of cigarettes was cancer and the idea of death through the lungs. And again John panicked because what if every time he meditated from now on he not only thought of the Edinburgh Book Festival and tents and Natalie-the-girl-he'd-almost-missed-fucking and Henri Bergson's concept of duration but also thought of wanting a cigarette? He would never be able to meditated again. This was becoming his worst meditation, ever. It couldn't go any worse than it was. He shouldn't have watched the porn. He shouldn't have watched the television. Watching television always fragmented his mind, ruined his concentration. And had he said yes to a coffee on the plane on the way over? No, he hadn't. But he had thought about sex with the air-hostess who had served him. Which reminded John of the receptionist downstairs. And his wife. He was married. He reminded himself he was married. He remembered the wedding and the church and his father's smile and the tits of the receptionist downstairs. He wanted to fuck the receptionist downstairs, to bring the receptionist downstairs upstairs, in the lift, and fuck her, just as he'd wanted to fuck the air-hostess who had served him, although her calves had been rather solid from so many hours standing, just as the receptionist downstairs probably had solid calves. He imagined her, the air-hostess who had served him, with her skirt up in the toilet cubicle, riding the length of his cock – which wasn't his cock any more but a long thick black cock, the long thick black cock. And the air-hostess who had served him became the receptionist downstairs, whose uniform was navy blue and of a horribly ridgy corporate fabric. John thought of his wife, and of his many unfaithfulnesses, and the receptionist downstairs riding his long thick black cock, and lying on top of him on the covers of this bed, the pillows around him, her on top because his left knee – the bastard – would give him so much pain if he tried the missionary position, after this meditation, even in his fantasies. Why hadn't he sat in the chair rather than knelt on the bed with all the hotel room's pillows and cushions beneath his arse? Now, he would have to ask receptionist downstairs to go on top when he brought her upstairs, in the lift, to fuck her as he'd imagined fucking the air-hostess who'd served him and as he'd once fucked Natalie in the hotel after his event at the Edinburgh Book Festival. He needed to return to the breath. His wife was the reason he had watched the interracial porn on the hotel television – because if he did that, and wanked, he was less likely to troll downstairs later on, after the minibar, in search of the receptionist downstairs, who would probably have gone off shift by then anyway, but who had definitely held eye-contact longer than necessary whilst he was checking in, and if he didn't check downstairs soon she would almost certainly have gone off shift by the time he did check, and he was only in this hotel for one night. John went back to the breath, for a series of breaths – forcing himself to listen to it as it went in and out, in and out, although he knew that having to force himself to listen was entirely counter to the spirit of this meditation. He should simply be letting his thoughts come and go, watching them with kindness and loving attention, but they didn't come and go, they came and didn't go. He thought about how rarely he thought about his wife. In the past half hour, he'd thought much more about the receptionist downstairs. She was brunette and had a tan that suggested she'd just come back from holiday – which in turn suggested a boyfriend. Perhaps a black boyfriend with a long thick black cock, so she wouldn't be interested in white-guy guests who, from the computer screen in front of her, she could probably tell had paid for the porn-channel only to turn his television off after watching and wanking for only five minutes. But if he left it another half an hour, although she might have gone off shift, he would know he was definitely ready to go again, should sex occur, with the receptionist downstairs upstairs on top. The pain in his left knee reminded him he was supposed to be meditating, and not thinking about sex or cigarettes. John became aware of the calm gay voice – aware of it because it wasn't speaking and hadn't been speaking for some time. He was in the middle of one of the gaps left for the listener just to get on with meditating. But he could hardly be said to be doing that, could he? He was just pinballing from sexual fantasy to sexual fantasy, as usual. It was useless – he should open his eyes and give up. Turn the television back on. Go and see if he could get chatting to the receptionist downstairs on reception. Ask her if there were any decent restaurants nearby, money no object – and whether she might be free to accompany him, seeing how he was at a loose end, new in town, unmarried. At the Edinburgh Festival, it had rained the whole time he was there – it had rained the whole time he was fucking Natalie on the same bedcover where, two hours earlier, he had listened to the gay Californian meditation voice for the first time. And in two hours' time, he could be pounding his long thick black cock into the receptionist. The Buddha. An aeroplane came into earshot somewhere overhead, bringing back an image of the now-partly-imaginary-air-hostess who had served him being fucked by him in the tight efficient toilet cubicle, with a whine as the wheels came out of the bottom of her plane and the fast air rushed around them, beginning her descent to orgasm, but not too loudly in case the other passengers were to hear, though it was hard to keep quiet with the pounding of his long thick

black cock, and he heard the hiss of her breath far up over his hotel-room as the whine of her pleasure lowered its note as she headed down towards the runway with her wheels now out and his long thick black cock that slurped in and out of her, like the toilet flushing behind her when it came to the end of its cycle, after the terrifying prolapse-causing suck when he flushed sitting down and it took his cock out as a bloody slug and his bowels as a brown rope through the side of the plane and out into the fast clear air over Edinburgh as the plane flew down in-between the raised high buttocks of the imaginary air-hostess who had served him and who was now bent over the sink of the cubicle as the airplane now whistled out of earshot or below the height where its climax could be heard from his hotel room where he had a knee and the knee was telling him not to kneel on his knee any longer or he would feel more and more pain in his knee, and where Christopher wasn't speaking now but only a memory of what Christopher would say were he to be addressing this issue, which he did in another of his five meditations, by saying that you should give the pain in your meditating body your full, compassionate, lovingkindness-feeling attention for as long as it took for your mind to lose interest in it. But the knee was a knee, and wasn't listening to Christopher – or letting John listen to Christopher, who was now really speaking in his recording into John's head about letting the breath find its own pace, not trying to control it in any way. And Christopher's calm gay voice continued, as if in reply, whenever you find yourself distracted by thoughts, just gently bring yourself back to the breath (of death, thought John) and let your awareness rest gently upon it (I can't rest, thought John), examining it closely, the sound of it, the feel of it, the swirls around your nose, the coolness, the itching, the tingling. He made it sound so easy, so possible. Had Christopher killed his desires with breathing? Or was Christopher fallible as anyone, going off into fantasies of long hard black cock in the locker room, gang-rape in the prison showers. And now John was the one being fucked. First by the receptionist downstairs, who came unexpectedly but delightfully equipped with a strap-on, and then by the black porn actor with the long thick black cock. Fucked up the arse, that was what would be on the hotel television right now. Anal. Hard anal. The breath. The Buddha The Buddha. But now the long thick black cock was pounding into Christopher, who had given up to it without resistance among the meditation cushions on the floor in California, surrounded by the devotees present at the recording session for this tape, and the fat garden Buddha was looking on and laughing, alongside the air-stewardess who had served him, whose hand was reaching over into the Buddha's lap, finding something there to palp amid the flab, and the Buddha seemed to be enjoying it, because it meant nothing. And then, from nowhere, from somewhere, Natalie joined in with Christopher and the black porn actor – taking Christopher's dangling long thin white cock in her smooth-backed hand, much as she had taken John's smaller cock in her hand in the hotel room in Edinburgh, after his event in the Festival, which, in his head, she was doing now simultaneously – her hand was in both places, fantasy and memory, her smooth knuckles clasped around Christopher's made up long thin white cock and his own present-but-in-the-past cock. This was, literally, a headfuck. Especially as Natalie was simultaneously herself, John's wife, his ex-wife, his ex-girlfriends, and every woman who had ever touched his cock – and his cock was the long thick black cock of the black porn actor, and Christopher's long thick white cock, the Buddha's flesh-buried cock, and every cock that had ever been. See if you can feel every breath for one minute more. The meditation had almost finished, but he hadn't been able to hold to the breath for more than – what? – two, three breaths in a row. But to try was to fail. To try was to exert oneself, and one shouldn't have a self to be conscious of to exert. John imagined the calm gay voice telling him, calmly, that with meditation there was no such thing as success or failure. But John knew there was, because he'd already failed to stay with the breath for the first ten seconds of this last minute. And then an image came to him, not porn: his breath was a flannel-like creature, underwater, a strange fish from the depths which swam by going from roughly concave to roughly convex. As he breathed in, the thing-fish covered his face and as he breathed out it flanged away – though adhering still to his mouth, where it did not stop but helped with his breathing. The image of the flap-fish made it easier to concentrate on his breath, though he knew the vivid visuality of it was a distraction from the pure no-mind that is the ultimate end point of meditation. But fuck that. John stayed with the breath for three, four, five breaths. The fish was now less a fish and more a cloth of muslin, underwater, shaping one way and the other, without texture. And then a light bell rang three times in his head to signal the end of the twelve minutes of the first meditation of A Beginner's Introduction to Meditation. John had forgotten his knee, and the long thick black cock. Pure mind. It was possible.

Prospect

By Jennifer Mills

When the storms start to look like they're over, Poppa sends me down to the wash with an old pan and a paintbrush, a couple of glass jars and a packet of his cigarettes. I fumble them all in my bare hands before I settle on pockets for everything except the frying pan, which I swing alongside me like a mechanical arm. The clouds and the earth broke with each other hours ago but I can still hear them yabbering on the horizon beyond the low cragged hills that mark our fenceline. You be careful, son, Poppa said. You get back here first sign of rain.

I pick my way through drowned flower heads which cling to the mud like paper limpets. I look for loot. The wash flushes everything downstream and we are thrifty through long breeding like the cattle who survive here. Poppa sends me after every flood and this is a big one. I know I will find something. I hurry to the water.

I like going down to the wash. I like to watch the desert fill its belly overfull like a hobo at his first dinner in weeks. I like the grey-brown water sliding hard and fast over the pebbles, the way we're suddenly surrounded by noise. The water sounds like it's alive and the birds always go crazy for it. When the rain comes it changes the world for weeks after: first the flood pushes everything around and then the growing comes. Everything overdone and wild for a while before it all starts to die over.

The best thing I found last year was a suitcase: a small cardboard case with a few photos and baby clothes inside. It wasn't damaged too bad but Poppa made me burn it in case it had diseases. The photos were all of Mexicans. I kept one of an old Mexican lady. She looks serious and round like a hot air balloon weighted down by all her clothes. Miguel down Pallets road found a cooler full of beer once, floating down like a little blue boat, and got it before it tipped. That was after the last big rain like this, three years ago, when we were still neighbours. Before he went off to college somewhere and forgot about Prospect. Miguel went to study law because he said there wasn't enough good lawyers. I said how do you know they didn't all start good? and he threw a bottle top at my head. Poppa says there's no law here but finders keepers and if you can defend your land it's yours to keep. Miguel should know that. His mama brought him over that border in the eighties. He was just a little kid back then and he says he don't remember anything about it.

It's funny to think of Miguel as a Mexican, I mean he is, but as one of those Mexicans that pour over here every day. They say there are hundreds of them in the desert at any one time. They move by night and in groups, lead by guys who know the trails. They call those guys coyotes. I hear them sometimes but I've never seen them. One time last winter I thought I heard voices right in our back field speaking Spanish and laughing. I looked out my window but there was no moon and I couldn't see any lights out there. I guess they don't use flashlights if they're hiding from the law. They say those coyotes can just about see in the dark.

I get down to the edge of the river and I squat on my heels to pan for minerals, filling the frypan and brushing it out the way I was taught. I call the wash a river now because it's flowing fast, wide and brown, but a few days ago it was just a dry gravel bed. I can see from here where they put that fancy new radio tower that is supposed to be looking for Mexicans but Poppa says it doesn't work. The government put that there last year and everyone says it's just for show. Even if it did work I don't know how they can use that thing to tell the difference between the illegals and us. Half the folks round here are from Mexico anyway, even if they're not Mexicans anymore. The rest of us are American, I guess. Miguel said it's the Californians that don't want all those Mexicans coming in, because they take the jobs. Down here we don't care so much if they cross into our land; there's no jobs to take. There's too many come through that we bother to mind about them anymore. And they're all headed somewhere better anyway.

I can see a snatch of bright purple fabric dancing in the water upstream from me. I watch it for a minute as it turns and makes its way toward where I sit. At first I think it's just a rag or something, but I soon see it's bigger than that. I grab a long stick off the ground nearby and I

reach across for it. The fabric is heavier than it looks and I can't get a hold on it. The water drags it away.

I take a cigarette out of the packet and hunt around in my pockets for the matches, but it turns out I forgot them. I stand up and stretch my legs, enjoying the brief chill that hovers in the air above the river and cools the backs of my knees. In a couple of days this air will be thick as sweat again and the clean smell of the wash will be replaced by the stink of its retreat. The stink of the cattle bones and rotten weed and who knows what else it leaves behind. But for now the air is crisp and clear, like the world's fresh-born.

I can see the purple rag still floating off downstream and I decide to follow it by walking alongside the wash. I'm thinking I'll catch up to it easy, but the water's moving fast and I soon have to skirt a section of sucky mud by clambering over a rise. I lose it then, but I track my way downstream anyway just to see what the water's done to the land. The bed of the arroyo shifts a little every year as the flood shoves the sand around and carves its signature into the rock. The McGills' fence is down and one of their horses is out. He's standing across the other side of the wash and he bares his teeth at me when I pass. I wave at him. There's nothing else I can do. The water's too high to cross here and old McGill will come down soon enough. Round here we look after our own fences.

I have to push my way through a web of prickle bushes and into some long grass and I'm glad I have the stick so I can whack the ground for snakes as I go. They usually come out after the rain, but I don't see any. Eventually I come up the slope against a crook in the arroyo where I can see a way ahead. There's a tree that's half knocked down, bent over in the middle with its branches over the water as if it's looking to see why its bed is so wet. There, suspended in a fork of those branches, I can see the purple cloth. Part of it is getting sucked underwater by a weight. A weight I can't help looking at now.

Border Patrol come down here all the time. They even let me ride in one of their trucks once, but not the chopper. There's two Black Hawks they got and they can fly just as low as they want to. It's supposed to scare the Mexicans out of the bushes. It scares the hell out of me sometimes. When they come on our land we bring them water or sometimes beer if it's a hot afternoon, and I sit with them and watch what they do. Mostly they stare at the horizon and brag. That Ant McGill is a border patrolman since he finished high school last year. He says it's better than the Marines. He says they catch twenty a day just off of our half dozen properties, flushing them out of the mountains like spooked rabbits. He whooshes his hands when he says this, and he grins.

I clamber down the side of the arroyo to the water's edge where the treefork is pinned like a wishbone stuck in a throat. I shed my shirt and I sit down to unlace my boots. There's no sense hurrying now. No sense at all.

I wade out to it, hanging onto the tree as I go, testing the depth of the water with my stick. When I get to it I brace myself against the trunk to yank at the purple t-shirt. The weight is heavier than it looks and the fabric tears in my hands. I have to get my arms under the body and twist it around. I don't mean to look in her face. I don't want to take in her gaping eyes, her dumb open mouth, the flies that come fumbling. She looks about twelve, maybe younger. Under the shirt I can see the little tits starting to grow and I get a feeling in my groin I have to swallow.

She doesn't smell bad. She hasn't been dead long enough. But I gag anyway. She's a bit bloated. Must be from the water. I can see she's torn her skin around at the neck and chest, probably from the rocks on the way down. The wounds aren't bruised. They can't have hurt her. She must have been dead already. The coyotes haven't got to her yet, the wild dogs I mean. I cover my mouth until I know I won't throw up. The wall of the arroyo is probably too steep with a load. I turn her back around and grab her by the clothes so I don't have to fetch at the raggedy skin. I fold her over my shoulders like a sack of feed and I start to carry her upstream.

It's hard going. The water's strong, it's still in flood, and I can't help thinking how much easier this will be when it dies down tomorrow. But back of those hills I can hear the thunder fussing, and I think Poppa was right. I don't think we've seen the last of the rain.

As I wade, I start thinking about McGill's horse and how I wouldn't go tell him his colt was out. He'd only get pissed at me for interfering. If it was our fenceline where the wire is broke it would

be a different story. But I start thinking maybe the horse could get caught up in the busted fence. Maybe he could get his leg broke and have to be shot. I start worrying about the horse so much I almost forget the Mexican. Then I remember Ant used to ride that horse and that gets me thinking about Border Patrol and the way they talk. Sometimes when Poppa's back at the house and I'm sitting with them they talk to me like I'm one of them. I asked them once what they do with the Mexicans when they catch them and they said some of them go to jail, but mostly they send them back. We shove 'em in a truck, they said, drive 'em over the border and leave 'em there. No use pushin' 'em further. Most of 'em gonna try again anyway.

The stream gets rocky in the part just around the bend. The walls of the arroyo are still too steep to climb so I put the Mexican down on a rock and try and drag her through the difficult part, sometimes pulling her by the armpits, sometimes lifting her over. When I have to lift her up over my head, the water from her clothes drips down into my eyes and I can't see where I'm going. She's a lot heavier than she looks. I lose my balance once or twice. Just when I think I've made it past the rocks I slip badly on some mud at the bottom of the stream and land on my face with the Mexican's body on top of my head. I throw her off and wallow into the water to get the thick mud off my arms and face. It already stinks like the leavings. I wipe the mud off my face with muddy water and look back. The light is starting to fade but I can still see the tree where I pulled her out. I've hardly covered any ground at all.

Then I curse because I remember I left my shirt back there, and my boots, and I'm crazy if I think I can walk home in the near dark with a dead girl and no goddamn boots on. Poppa's always telling me don't curse in front of girls. Laying on her side in the mud, her face away from me, the Mexican looks like she's asleep. I can't think what to do. I can't hardly think at all anymore. I have to leave her here. I have to just leave her here and figure what to do. I look around at the clouds, and I decide it isn't gonna rain again. Not tonight.

I run back for my shirt and boots, pull the boots on, tie the shirt round my waist and climb back over the rise. I pretend I can't see the thunderheads hovering in the distance. It's getting late, that's why it's getting dark. I cut through the long grass until I come back to the place where the girl is laying. I clamber down and drag her out of the mud and up to dry ground, out of reach of the wash. I pool her under a tree and I leave her there.

I run alongside the wash until I get back to the place where I left the frying pan and paintbrush. There's no gold in the pan of course. There never is. All the good minerals were mined out of here years ago. Miguel used to say all the gold's gone to California too. Poppa still thinks he's gonna come across a nugget one day and all our problems will be solved. But he sends me down after every flood, and nothing ever changes.

My heart's beating hard now from running and I go through my pockets for a cigarette, remember I forgot the matches, give up and turn for home. The rumble in the sky could be thunder, could be a helicopter, could be nothing but the inside of my head.

Ant McGill told me there's too many people around here who protect the Mexicans. He says they're all criminals. Most of them are carrying drugs and that's why they never have ID. He says the women only come here to be whores. I asked him what they do when they find a dead one. How do they find out who they are if they don't have any ID. He said they send them back like they found them. They let the Mexican cops worry about it. Mostly they never find their people. It's their own fault, Ant says. They already chose to leave their people behind. He grins and leans down to talk into my ear, his breath stinking of tobacco and coffee. Some of them we don't send back right away, he says. Some of them little Mexican girls. At the time I was certain he meant the live ones. But now I'm not sure.

I get back to the house just in time for supper but I'm covered in mud so I have to shower first. My hands are steady under the hot water. I get the mud off but I don't feel a whole lot cleaner after. Poppa doesn't ask but I tell him I fell in the river. He doesn't say a word, just raises an eyebrow and turns back to the cooker. We eat corn bread and bacon for supper and the corn bread's fried in bacon grease and the smell of it makes me feel like I'm going to throw up again but I don't say anything and I hold my breath to swallow and I get it all down.

Poppa pats me on the shoulder as I go to bed, as if I was a working animal, as if I did a fair job. I lay down in the dark with my eyes open for a while. Then I turn on the lamp next to my bed and

lay there for a while more with the light on listening to the thunder outside. It's set to moaning like an old dog. Finally I pull the photo of the old Mexican lady out from under the lamp. Maybe she has the same features, but they all look kinda the same. The girl's dead eyes looked more like the dead eyes of an animal than the living eyes of another person. I've only seen animals dead before. I put the old lady back and turn the light out and I go to sleep.

I dream I am hiking the trails through the back country down near the border. Hot hills and ocotillo. The sun on my back. Mexican garbage all over the place. A shoe worn through, an empty juice bottle. Corn chips and Red Bull. A tiny pink schoolbag. I've never seen them and I don't see them in the dream, but wherever I go I see their traces along the trails. In my dream the trash gets thicker and thicker until it's piled so high I can't get through. I push and push but I can't get through. When I wake up it's raining again. It's raining again and I don't move.

Static

By Alison Moore

Wilfred takes the dirty teacup from the bedside table. Dorothy's eyes are closed, but she is still awake, just resting. The gilt-edged, rose-print Duchess has seen better days; it is stained with tannin and the gilt around the rim is worn. "I'll be back with a fresh one," he says. He closes the bedroom door behind him and climbs slowly down the stairs, the bone china cup trembling on its saucer.

In the kitchen, he puts the used teacup in the empty stainless steel sink and stands for a few minutes looking out of the window into the back garden. They have lived in this house their whole married life. From time to time, Dorothy has suggested moving – sometimes to another town or to the countryside, sometimes to the sea or even abroad. They could even travel, she said, now that their children were grown up and no longer at home. But he would rather stay where they are. He grew up in this town; he has never lived anywhere else in his life.

The things on the windowsill are Dorothy's. There is a small frame containing an old photograph of a woman. She is so familiar; she has been on the kitchen windowsill for forty years and he has no doubt looked at her every day, and yet he has no idea, he thinks now, who she is. She looks a lot like his Dorothy – perhaps he knew once that it was a favourite aunt or a grandmother, but if he ever knew he doesn't know now.

Next to the photograph is an empty vase, and a stone the size of his fist. He picks it up, weighs it on his palm. It has a hole worn through the middle; it is like a cored apple. He wonders how it got there, the hole. Through it he can see his own hand, the naked pinkness, his life line and his love line.

Dorothy listens to a programme called Love Line on a local radio station. Listeners call in with their own stories about how they met someone or lost someone, with proposals and confessions, and then they request a dedication, a love song. Tacky, says Wilfred, sentimental popcorn. He is not one of the world's great romantics, says Dorothy. She used to tease him about calling in with a request for her, but she hasn't mentioned it in a while.

The radio isn't working properly; when he turns it on there is interference, white noise. He picks it up, takes it over to the table and sits down. For a minute, he just holds it, this beautiful, broken old thing, and then he takes a coin out of his pocket, fits it in the slot on top of the plastic case, and twists. The case pops apart.

It is a lovely little transistor radio, a Constant, turquoise and gold. It is the radio Dorothy brought into the antiques shop where he used to work, asking if they did repairs. He wasn't supposed to, said Wilfred, not unless she was selling. He looked at the Vulcan 6T-200 she was holding, her slender thumb with its polished nail toying with the dial. It was foreign; he hadn't seen one before. He didn't know how it worked, what he would find if he prised open the case. But yes, said Wilfred, he could do it.

After they were married, it drove Dorothy mad to find their things in bits all the time – the component parts of the record player all over the carpet, her music box disassembled on the sofa, the mess of stuff all over the kitchen table. She worried about small, crucial pieces getting lost – slipping down behind the sofa cushions, rolling under the fridge, dropping between the floorboards. She told him off for tinkering with things that weren't broken, things that weren't his, for having such busy little fingers.

Dorothy, confined to bed now by her illness, frets about the downstairs rooms she can't see. She imagines Wilfred pottering about dismantling their things; she imagines the dishes and the washing and the dirt piling up. She has to rely on him to keep it all in good order. She says to him, "All as it should be?" "All as it should be," he says, holding out his dishpan hands as proof.

To look at her, he thinks, you wouldn't suspect a thing. You wouldn't know that beneath her clear skin a tumour is eating her alive; you wouldn't know that her calm, grey eyes are going blind. She is losing her memory; she has lost the feeling in her toes. "When I'm better," she said, "we'll go walking again, and I need new walking boots." "Yes, love," he said, taking her dirty cup from the bedside table.

Wilfred sits quietly gutting the radio on the kitchen table, on the plastic tablecloth. The tablecloth depicts the changing seasons. Tiny screws lie at the base of the autumn tree like strange windfall. His right arm rests on winter; the thinning elbow of his cardigan presses against the bare tree, against the snow, against the cold plastic.

When Dorothy got ill, he didn't change the channel; he listened to her programme while he washed up, and caught himself singing (*Just one smile...*) while he dried (*Just one kiss...*). But mostly he moves about in silence, in socks on the carpet, while Dorothy sleeps upstairs. He feels like a stealthy burglar, quietly rooting through drawers, looking for everyday things which Dorothy has always been in charge of, looking for paper on which to write a letter to his brother-in-law, looking for her recipes so that he can make Dorothy her favourite dessert. He has never written to his brother-in-law or made a dessert in his life; these things are in Dorothy's domain. He feels like a trespasser in Dorothy's house, going through a stranger's things.

He found her scrapbook of favourite recipes in the big bottom drawer in the kitchen, with annotations in pencil – *nice cold the next day, tinned is fine, good with almonds*. Her favourite dessert is tiramisu; it is the first thing she ever made for him. The pencilled note says, *Wilfred didn't like it*.

She is very tidy, Dorothy, but she is a hoarder. In the same drawer, he found a serviette from a café, a handful of seashells, old theatre and concert programmes, a small fluffy toy he once won at a fairground – a cheap thing which she has kept all this time. He found birthday cards – *To Dorothy, they said each year, with love from Wilfred* – and the cursory postcards he sent her when he was away from the family on business trips, and half a dozen letters, aged and faded, the postmarks almost as old as their youngest daughter. He took them out and read them, and it was like falling through a hole in time. *My darling, they said to Dorothy, who was still so young. He leaned his weight on the kitchen counter, the pages quivering from the slight tremble in his fingers. I love you, they said, and Yours always.* He is not, Dorothy has said, an emotional man, but, reading these old letters he found that his cheeks had become wet. He dried them on his shirt cuff, and then he pulled the sleeve of his cardigan down over the damp cuff. He put the letters back in their envelopes and put them back in the drawer; he put everything back the way it had been, keeping it all in good order.

He bends over the radio's innards like a surgeon exploring a patient on the operating table, searching for the fault – looking for something loose, looking for degradation – wanting to fix it; trying, with his set of tiny screwdrivers and his Brasso, to turn back time, to make this old thing like new, as it used to be, as it is supposed to be.

He has never been with another woman. He has never wanted anyone but Dorothy.

They honeymooned in Morecambe. They walked on the beach, Dorothy pausing every few steps to pick up some pretty thing which caught her eye, filling her pockets with empty shells. Wilfred, dawdling beside her, wanted nothing more, wanted nothing to change.

They spent their summer holidays in Morecambe too – every year except one, when Dorothy suggested trying somewhere new. They tried Scarborough, but Wilfred didn't enjoy it. "It's not Morecambe," he said.

The last of the winter light dribbles in through the two small kitchen windows. The outside world, with all its people, all its noise, all its growth and change, seems miles away; the world is these two windows, these two patches of blank, grey sky. It is not even four o'clock but it is getting dark. He switches on the too-bright striplight which Dorothy would be glad to see the back of, along with the rest of the tired old kitchen. Some of the cupboard doors are loose, and the big bottom drawer sticks, and the sink leaks, and the linoleum floor is worse for wear. "When I'm better," Dorothy said, "we should get a new kitchen – new units, and a sink with a mixer tap, and nice stone tiles on the floor." A stone floor would be cold in the winter, he said, and mixer taps were unhygienic. He liked it, he said, the way it was, but he would tighten the hinges on the cupboard doors and reseal the sink.

It has been this way for forty years, and it has been just fine, he thinks, so why go making trouble now, why go making all that mess? Has she even looked in that drawer, he wonders – the drawer in which she keeps the recipes she now makes from memory, and the forty-year-old keepsakes, and the faded love letters – in all that time?

And it is just as long since he last took the back off the radio. It has lasted remarkably well. It is simple to fix, as it happens: one deft turn and it is mended; a good clean and polish with a soft cloth and it is restored to its former glory. He puts the two halves of the case together again, snaps them shut, and tests it. It is as good as new. It looks the way it looked when Dorothy returned to the shop at the end of the week, stepping through the doorway and walking towards the counter, her heels loud on the bare floorboards. It looks the way it looked as she turned it over in her hands, admiring his work, as she turned the dial through the stations, found Gene Pitney (*I don't ask for much...*) and lingered there, asking what time he finished work.

He puts on the kettle and rinses out the Duchess teacup.

They went to a café and had a pot of tea. He had a scone and Dorothy had a tiramisu. Sinking the prongs of her fork into her dessert, she said, "Italian cakes..." and as her lips closed

over the first bite, her face said *exquisite*. Between mouthfuls, licking her lips, she said, “I’d love to go to Italy.”

He puts the radio under his arm and goes upstairs, climbing slowly to keep the tea steady in its cup, his socks deathly quiet on the stair carpet. He opens the bedroom door and puts the tea down on Dorothy’s bedside table.

“When you write to my brother,” she says, “tell him we’ll come and visit in the summer.”

“I was thinking,” he says, “about making your tiramisu.” Dorothy smiles. “It’s a nice thought, Wilfred,” she says, “but I’m not sure I have the appetite for it, and you’d just make a mess, and anyway I don’t think I have the recipe anymore.” He watches her, trying to see in her unfocused eyes, in her unchanged expression, whether she has forgotten all these things she kept in the big bottom drawer which sticks, but he can’t tell.

“All as it should be?” she asks him.

He reaches out with a dishpan hand and cups the side of her head, her skull and her warmth in the palm of his hand, his thumb stroking her temple. He takes the radio from under his arm, turns it on and tunes it to Dorothy’s favourite station. She smiles. “All as it should be,” he says.

“When I’m better,” says Dorothy, “we should go on a proper holiday. I’ve always wanted to see Italy.” Wilfred sits down on the edge of the bed, picks up the teacup and puts it in Dorothy’s waiting hands. “Yes,” he says, but the romance countries don’t appeal to him.

“This is the wonderful Gene Pitney,” says the DJ, “with a song from 1967, for a very special lady.” Dorothy turns her head towards the radio. The DJ says, “Fiona, this is for you.” She looks away, her failing eyesight sliding over Wilfred’s face. She smiles again, and lifts the teacup towards her mouth. “You’re not one of the world’s great romantics,” she says, finding the rim, touching her lips to what is left of the gilt.

He has never wanted anyone but Dorothy. But he has never asked for her favourite song to be played on the radio. He has never taken her to Italy. He is not the sort of man who brings home flowers.

And he has never written a love letter in his life.