

WE GO AROUND IN THE NIGHT
AND ARE CONSUMED BY FIRE

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BY FIRE

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*For my father, who believed in me always,
even when the facts clearly mitigated against it.*

So come here
Give me your hand
Because I know how to hold it
Look, I will write you a poem
And I'll set it on fire

Kate Tempest, 'Renegade'

Prologue

I'm trying to remember it now, because that was when everything changed. When I saw her go down, all I really remember is the pain like my heart was crushed, and me not able to breathe. Slow motion, a dream, I can see myself punching through the crowd, legs giving way when I got there. Then kneeling, all blood, her head on my knee.

Carla. My light, my soul.

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November 2008

I'm not gonna fool you because like the man says, there's nothing shabbier than those farewell fucks. And I still feel pretty bad about it if I'm honest, Louise still sobbing on the comedown and me, I'm already half out the door.

I hit the street and just as I'm breathing back out, slow and careful, Mina legs it up from the ginnel, grinds her tail to a halt as she reaches me.

Hey Donna, how's it going?

I keep on walking and try for polite, Hey Mina, what's going on girl?

All the time I'm walking fast, past the burned-out Fiesta on bricks, dodging the broken glass, but she just follows me, hanging on to my arm. Not that I mind, maybe I even think she's cute, looking up at me like that with those big storm eyes, but she goes with Carla, on and off, and that's way more woman problems than I need right now.

I'm trying not to look over my shoulder just in case Louise is watching but already I'm feeling pretty good, like something brand new is about to happen, cold air hitting my

lungs like menthol poppers. Mina smiles and I like the way her top teeth show, even and white. I grab on to her hand. C'mon, I says, let's get outta here.

OK, it's not clever, but now we're in the yard behind Fozzie's between the bins, underneath the ice-blue neon EXIT and I got her pushed up against the wall, biting her lip like I can't get enough of her smooth sweet skin. Then I'm just thinking how I should stop now before it all gets way too messy, when she pushes my hand between those creamy soft thighs, my gut falls out through my knees and I'm gone.

After, she lights up a cigarette, leans on the wall, buttons still all undone, my arm numb from holding her up and the salt of her still in my mouth. Don't tell Carla, she says.

As if.

And it's not like I owe her an explanation but I gotta punch this day back into shape somehow, so I look at the ground, stay away from the eyes. Don't worry baby girl, it's not like this is gonna happen again.

Then I look up and she's looking straight back and the storm's all backed up right there on the horizon, heading right for me.

Yeah right, she says. Then she gives me those teeth.

It's only later with Carla in Fozzie's knocking back Gold Label and eating fried chicken and laughing, watching Marta working it up with some babe from the Gooch, when Carla looks at me, So?

And I know she means Hey c'mon tell me what happened, I'm just hoping she means with Louise. It's over, I go, mouth full of dumpling.

Ahh jeez, goes Carla, I bet she took it bad.

I shrug, but then I'm thinkin' about Mina how slick she was and how she shuddered so long and how I put my hand over her mouth to stop her crying out. I kick against the boards. I don't wanna talk about it, I say.

Carla smiles and winks past me and I follow the wink. Marta's leaning in, her back to us, new girl trapped between herself and the bar. Girl catches the wink, smiles right back.

Carla peers at me, What's up with you, mardy?

Before I can answer she slaps a hand to my shoulder and I follow her eyes to where Fatboy and that lardarse Mouse are just filling the door. I check out my blade and I know Carla's the same. What the fuck?

But Carla's not listening. What's the score, motherfucker? she says under her breath, never takes her eyes off the door.

That's when Fatboy strides over, hands in his jacket, looking like someone just fucked his old lady in the tail. I look sideways at Carla, Aw, tell me you didn't?

Anyway there's not much time for conversation and I'm just trying to figure out what's with the jacket, when Fats leans down with one scrawny hand, grabs Carla by the scruff of the T. I'm up fast, reach for my blade.

Carla pushes back and her chair goes over, Sonn an' Lise come outta nowhere, then it's the four of us, facing him down.

Then Deej jumps the bar, Hey hey c'mon now ladies, just take it outside.

Fatboy throws her a look and it's just enough for me to grab his hand and twist it up behind him, slickety-dick, then I got one arm over his shoulder, blade pushed in right under his eye. I kick his blade away with my foot, then I'm in at his ear and I'm grinning. Someone's a long way from home, I say.

Most times if something kicks off girl on girl me and Carla both got stripes so we pretty much get to say what goes. Other times we let the boys do their thing. And apart from us and the Darts who stick together since Operation Balboa went down we don't mess with each other. That's the rules and mostly they work out fine. So two Cheetahs walking smack into a Darts bar with no pass is bang out of order. That happens and it's pretty much fair game to us, no comeback. Even if someone *did* tup your old lady behind your back, and by now I'm wondering just what the fuck Carla was thinking.

Anyhow, Fozzie's is Ashton which is deffo our patch, so Fatboy musta known what he was getting into when he came looking for Carla. I think about nicking his face, right under the eye, just so he's got a reminder. I sneak a look back but the door's just a wide hole now right into the night, and that fool-boy Mouse is nowhere to be seen.

Who says you could come over here? I say.

Then I know by the silence, just by the fact he says nothing. Zilcho. Nada. He's got no pass, and now he knows that I know. So now I'm laughing, Hey girls, it's playtime.

Up the Old Road and there's the car park by the mill, wet with the rain and all covered in weeds. The van bumps over the potholes and Carla pulls up by the doors and I'm out. I can see the street-lights winking from the road and hear the faraway sound of cars whishing by in the rain. I put my face up to the night, the raindrops fall soft, taste smoky.

By the time we get Fats up the stairs he's cursing. We stretch him out flat, tie his hands to the old radiator, tie his feet together. Sonn sets up the light, one of those big arc

things, runs off a battery the size of Yorkshire. I go over to the boards where the window should be, peek out through the gaps. The sky's wet velvet, clouds scudding, no stars. I get out the phone, try Mikey again, no answer.

Then behind me I hear Fatboy hawk-up and spit.

I look over and Carla's sitting right up on his chest, wiping her face with one arm, blade up under his chin. She rips open his shirt. Best gag him, I say.

Lise takes off her pants, red with lace edges, stuffs them in his mouth to shut him up. Then Carla takes off her belt, the one with the Diesel buckle, wraps it right round his face to keep the gag in, clips it tight.

Yay, let's stick him, goes Sonn.

Carla nicks Fats on the chest, not deep, but he squeals. Then she reaches back, slaps her arse Asda-Price, turns on the charm.

What you think she wants with you, beast-boy, when she got all this?

You tell 'im honey, says Sonn.

I sit down by the window for a cig, let Carla get on with it. After a while she sits back, points the knife at his belly, looks round at us, Well?

We all traipse on over for a look. Fats is squirming like a taddy, great big letter C carved right on to his belly.

Man, that's a fucking work of art, says Sonn.

Lise squints at the C. That for Carla?

Carla grins. Nope, it's for Cunt.

I hand her the biro. She breaks the ink with her teeth, spits on the cut, rubs the ink in with her hand, like polish. Then she pulls out the gag, leans right down to his face.

You beat her again, fuckwit, I'm gonna kill you, she says.

Fuck you lesbo-cunt, goes Fats. And that's his second mistake.

Carla rams the knickers back down his throat. In your dreams. She grabs for his fly. Hey, you even got a dick?

Fats is bucking now, eyes like saucers, trying to throw her off.

That's enough now, I go.

Carla lets go and Fats goes all limp, tiny flash at the corner of one eye, looks wet. And that's about the long and the short of it round our way, you could string up a homey's grandmother and he wouldn't shed a tear, but go anywhere near his dick and he's blubbing like a girl. Time for his goodbye present, I say, looking at Lise.

Carla puts the knife at his neck, Close your eyes.

Fats just opens them wider.

She reaches down, grabs his crotch, I said close them, fuck-head.

So now Fats got his eyes squeezed tight, looks just like he's praying, and that's got to be a first. Carla gives his dick an extra squeeze, You open those eyes, boy, you're dead.

Lise walks over, one six-inch stiletto each side of his head. Then he's thrashing about, choking, as a hot stream of piss hits him right in the face.

Lise shakes and steps off, dainty, grins down at him. Water-boarding, fuck-face, a-la-dyke.

After a while we drop him off, way out on the East Lincs, him still screeching like a girl, hands backed right up to his feet.

Sonn opens the back doors of the van, rolls him out on to the hard shoulder with a thud. Carla does a yu-ey, drives

back straight towards him, swerves at the last minute and then we're back off towards town.

Lise hangs out the window, Hey Fats! You can keep the knickers.

Then everyone's laughing fit to shit, because a few pokes with a blade got nothing on sheer out-and-out humiliation, anyways not where a Cheetah's concerned.

Never liked those keks much anyway, says Lise.

Carla's got this look like she's flying. I hope he fucking chokes on them, she says.

Then we're laughing so hard the van hits the pavement, drags the bollard right along the wet tarmac, throwing out sparks. Till Carla puts her foot down, drives up and over some old-boy garden, scrapes it off good.

Towards town up the parkway and we pass the park. Everyone knows the Alex is the line between the Doddington and the Gooch, always has been, and back in the day that was pretty much it for South Manchester. Used to be the park was just another rec, scrubby grass full of dog shit, old settees, broken swings, somewhere to dump your empties after a weekend, but that was before they knocked down the Crescents, and long before the council knocked down Gooch Close and Doddington Way and the Pepperhill, sent everyone spinning right out to Hattersley and Wythenshawe, mixed them all up, wondered why when they got them all out there there was hell on.

Operation China took out most of the Gooch way back in the '90s. I guess the council was feeling all puffed up with themselves after that, went on a roll thinking if they knocked all our places down, moved in some yuppies, somehow we'd

be gone. You don't have to be Yasser Arafat to know things just don't work that way, never have. Knock people's places down, just makes them cling on harder. Then you got people clinging on to dreams, and you can't ever fight that.

The dib have another go every five years give or take, take out the top tier. Cut something back just makes it grow thicker and faster, Carla says, but I guess no one ever told the police that. So now instead of one lot in the south there's the Young Gooch, the Mad Dogs, the Bloods and a dozen others, all hanging together. Makes no odds what you call them, never will. Go west from the Alex, scratch the surface, you'll always find Gooch.

Follow the A57 east out of town and you're in Darts country, God's Own, we're the grown-ups. Take my word for it, it's not just estates full of hoodies on mountain bikes shooting at anything that moves, postcode boundaries and such. Sure, we got all that, but they're just bangers, the youngsters, don't really belong to anything much. Just kids running round like headless chickens getting under everyone's feet, out to get noticed, no controlling them. Gets everyone a bad name.

These days it's about business. Across the east there's maybe half a dozen shotters, including White Mike who heads up the Darts. Shotters are free-floating businessmen, don't get mixed up with the street stuff unless they have to.

The Brontes we're Darts but we're not if you get me, special status, on account of we're dykes and we're smarter than most. Me and Carla started it off, pretty much, back when I was in the hostel and Carla lived in Bronte Close with her mam. Never looked back since then.

Don't get me wrong, there's always been women hang around with the Darts or on the street, but used to be either you're someone's old lady or a fish looking for a barrel to get shot in, and that's about the long and short of it if you're a girl. I got no time for it, you-are-who-you-fuck and all that cat-fighting stuff. Don't need some gang-banging dickhead to cover *my* arse.

Time was, everybody hated each other but now we all just get on with it. Mike reckons it's better for business and I reckon he's right. And as long as there's enough to go round and no one takes the piss, I guess it'll stay that way. Mind you, anything ever happens to Mike and we'll have that psycho Tony Maggs to work with, and he's a crazy homophobic bastard, which is rich, considering. A real fruit-loop and I got no time for that rent-boy thing. He was anyone else and people would call it what it is, put some lead between his eyes, put him out of his misery.

Go north up through town and you got the Cheetahs and Salford. Salford never really been touched, run a real tight ship, been in business since Adam was a lad. Tiny Stewart's been tried three times for murder so far, walked every time. Lives out in Preston now, got a pool and everything, did that TV thing last year, told the world he's gone straight. My arse. Award-winning documentary? Award-winning piss-take more like. I even felt a bit sorry for that BBC tosser.

The Cheetahs run on families, always have. Got some real mad fuckers and they're all related to each other like the Queen and the Royal Family, so they're tight. Big Tommo McVey is in charge. He's a brutal bastard and you wouldn't cross him, but he's not stupid and he gets on with Mike okay, so we're sound. Mike says it'll all change when baby brother

Mad Daz takes over, anything happens to Tom. That's the trouble with doing things by family, see. You know what's coming next but fuck all anyone can do about it.

What I'm saying is they got a real steady ship in the north on account of never being taken down by the dib. To my mind it's stale though, all of them past thirty. One thing Carla says about pruning is it keeps all the new shoots coming, keeps everything fresh.

Bang on the border, we get to the bridge. Looks good, the tag, even in the dark.

Hey look, whoops Lise, that's us.

Read it me, says Sonn.

I read it out.

What the fuck does that mean? says Sonn.

How d'you get it up there? goes Lise.

I point to the metal ledge over the carriageway. One hand, hang on with the other. Took four cans, I says.

Tricksy, says Lise. Shouldn't that be 'We Are Consumed'?

Sonn snorts. You wanna swing from that bridge, Lise, make some alterations, no problemo, she says.

So we're still laughing when Carla pulls us up sharp. Then we're just staring down the Cheetah border, and it's silent as a grave. Carla's chewing on her lip like she does when she's thinking. Then I'm on it, No way.

I'm going in to get her, says Carla. Not loud, like when she wants me to talk her out of it, just dead quiet like when she means, you say what you want but I am.

Are you mad, bitch? goes Sonn. And fair enough, it's only what we're all thinking.

You wanna lose those stripes for some sugar, baby girl? That gonna be haaard candy girlfriend, I kid you not, she says.

Now we're all smiling. I swear, ever since she got Sky Plus she's been talking like that.

Carla just shrugs and I seen that look too many times before.

Anyone don't wanna come can get out now, she says.

Did I say that? goes Sonn, sulky. I'm just saying, is all.

I lean over and turn off the engine and it's like someone just switched the amp off. Just the sound of the rain and nothing moving, smudges of the street-lights all down the estate.

Then all at once I'm seeing it all stretched out in front of me and trying to work out who to call, trying to figure out what's gonna happen if Carla struts in there and takes a Cheetah's old lady, and what if it kicks off like a full-on war and who's gonna side with who if it does, and then who's gonna win. And whoever wins who's gonna get wasted because although it ought to amount to the same thing, it almost never does.

And what if the lads say sorry girls but you're on your own with this one, we can't be backing you up on this. Thinking if they did there'd be no end to it and then some Cheetah or Longsight dyke could shimmy up and smooch their missus right out from under their skinnyboy arse. Maybe they're right.

What you smiling at? says Lise.

Nothing, I says. What we got in the back?

She's up and climbs over and pulls up the floor, peeps back over.

Mac, the Glock, three bats and the tyre arm, she says.

Then I'm looking at the Mac and I'm shaking my head. The Uzi, I says, look under the seat. And I'm not being picky for nothing because I swear not one of them can hit shit on a barn door with a Mac-10, and one day the kickback's gonna take us all out.

Sonn leans down and she's scrabbling under the dash, pulls out the Black & Decker and grins. And you gotta hand it to her, she loves that fuckin' nail gun even though no one else with a gram of sense would touch it. God love her, chain of evidence means nothing to that girl.

Yo, Uzi! shouts Lise from the back.

I wedge my feet on the dash. Listen up now, I say, because this is the score. Darts to Cheetah, we got no problems, but Carla's not just dipping her swizzle in some other chick's sherbet so we got no real argument girl on girl. We go in now and it's gonna piss the Cheetahs off big-time, and then they're gonna come mob-handed, thinking we musta cleared it with Mike, which we haven't. Then we got us a war.

I'n't we supposed to ask before we kick off a war? goes Lise.

Don't get me wrong, I love Lise like a sister, and in a showdown there's no one I'd rather stand with, but for someone with all them GCSEs there's times she isn't that bright. Sonn's polishing the nail gun with the hem of her T now, and even though she's looking down I can tell that she's grinning.

You could say that, Lise, I says.

Now I'm looking over at Carla for some help. Well I'm hoping for some kind of back-down if I'm honest, but she's looking straight down the road into the estate like she's

expecting the three wise men to rock up, do some tricks with a camel.

You sure about this one, Car? Because this could be a shit-loada trouble.

Carla looks straight ahead like she never heard.

I don't like the way this thing is going, so I got one more thing I can try. It's a low punch, but it beats a good kicking, which is deffo what we're all heading for if things don't slow down. What about Mina then? I says.

And right off I wish I hadn't, because maybe I'm imagining things but she gives me this look, What about her?

So that's it then, game on, because whatever goes down I've run with Carla for more years than I been without her, and one way or another she's like my sister, my blood. And maybe if we get out of this even half-alive I won't ever have to think about what happened with Mina, because Carla must want this new one pretty bad, so she's not gonna care about what we got up to.

Carla leans forward, and with the street-light on her and her mouth pressed together like that she's got the face to make a heart turn. She looks right at me. Girl, you coming or not?

Hey gorgeous, I says, you got it.

Then she starts up the van and turns off the lights, and we're moving slow across the border and down the estate. And it's dead quiet, except for the click-click of Sonn loading up the nails, and the thumpa thumpa thumpa of our hearts.

OK I don't know why but now I'm thinking about Aurora and I can't shake it.

I'm up to three god-kids now, counting Ror – four if you count the one on the way. Everyone knows Ror's my special one though because she was the first, and because she's Carla's if I'm honest, which makes her nearly mine. Not that I'm into all that Our-Lady-Of-All-The-Sorrows shit. I've got shit enough without having to kneel down for it.

When it comes to god-kids I only do girls. Lise says having only girls could be discrimination but I told her it's not, it's just putting the balance back. The way I see it, what a girl needs these days is someone to back her up. And round our way that better be someone who *can* back her up, not someone who's going to beat on her or fuck her or fuck her over, not someone she's gonna *owe*. A girl needs someone to tell her, look, just because you're a girl you don't have to take all the shit they throw out. Especially not lying down. A girl needs someone around who knows that when she doesn't want to do something it's most likely because she doesn't want to do it, not just because she can't piss standing up.

Lise says soon people going to only want girls and that'll be my fault. I told her, not before time. Truth is women are just catching on, being how boys are just grief. Every mam knows you can't just love them and let them alone to figure it out, think stuff out for themselves. You got to work on them, hold on to them, no let-up. Otherwise they're like those rat things that follow each other over the cliffs on Discovery Wild, just going to band together, get themselves killed.

Being my god-kid is an honour, anyone will tell you; it's a matter of protection when all's said and done. If she's my soldier she gets to use my tag when she hits the streets and then no one's going to shit on her. No wonder there's

a queue. And it makes sense: what kind of mam wouldn't want the best for her kid?

Anyhow, like I said, Ror's my special girl, she's just gone ten now, born October 1998 just after me and Car left care. That was a good year all round. Sometimes I tag her up with mine when I'm passing the school. D-o-n-n-A-u-r-o-r-A. Link us up on the A just so's everyone knows she's my soldier, in case there's any of that playground shit. Other times I sneak into the yard, sit under the prefab window. Throw bits of gravel one at a time up at the glass, just to make her smile.

One time last summer, when everything smelled of hot tarmac and old cans, and Aurora got herself right next to the window so we could pass notes, we're just minding our own business when the window bursts wide open.

Old Wizeny-Cunt puts her head out, sees me, then slams it shut, hard.

I can hear the other kids laughing. Then, over the top, The Wiz starts shrieking,

O-Rora. Give. It. To. Me. Don't. You. Dare.

And then I knew, it was the note. My girl's gone and swallowed it, without me having to teach her, or anything. I have to tell you now, I was properly proud.

I pull the handbrake up hard, cut the engine. Carla slams her fist against the wheel, What the fuck now?

Don't get me wrong, Carla's a great mam. Probably the best, being how she never shouts and hardly ever hits out, how her and Ror are always laughing about some scam or other. And Carla's dead good at all that sappy stuff that I'd be totally shit at. But sometimes she gets carried away

with things, gives no thought to what might happen to Ror if she's left all alone with both of us gone. Lise says that's most likely because Carla's got a mam that would have been better dead years ago but just isn't. Anyhow, now and again I gotta do the thinking for all of us.

Get in the back, I says to Carla, you're not going. The rest of us, it's enough.

Now everyone's looking at me, thinking I've gone soft in the head. Maybe I have, but I'll get plenty of time to think about that later. Right now I gotta pull rank, just to get some control back, before we all get the jitters. It's a fucking order, I says.

Carla's looking down the street through the windscreen. I follow her eyes and see Fatboy's steel door glint in the street-lights.

It's too late, she says. And it is.

I look around, nothing moving.

It's too fucking quiet, I say. And it is.

Next thing, Carla whips the van round, puts her foot down, backs up the crescent quick-time, engine whining like a 747, it's a pure wonder they don't hear us in Hattersley. Before we know it, we're up on the pavement by the house. I give Carla a shove, Stay in the van then, keep her ticking. Just till we know.

Sonn's over the side gate and round the back before you can say commando. Knows her stuff that girl. Me and Lise are over the front fence, bank up the door on each side, Glock cold and sweet in my hand.

Then something makes me look back at the van and I can see Carla texting, the wink of her phone. What the fuck is she doing?

I'm watching Carla for a sign but she's leaning back now inside the van, in the shadows. I can hear my own breath, tight in my chest. The blood pumps to my knees and those tiny prickles creep up and all over my skin. I wait. The blood rushes to my thighs and I'm breathing shallow, hardly moving. Better than good.

I bang once on the door with my fist.

Seems like forever before I hear the grille-hole slide open, me and Lise sinking back into the wall, brick cold and wet against my cheek, everything smelling like bonfires and dog piss. I hear the bolts on the door slide back, one by one, sneak a look at the van.

Then bugger-me, like she's on a walk in the park I see Carla smiling as she slides out of the van, and I know it's not me she's smiling at. Course it's not. And right beside me the door opens, and this tiny cute chick with long black hair and a silvery holdall steps right out of the doorway like she's stepping on to the fucking red carpet, and I swear she floats to the van. No, Hi girls. Not even a, Ta then. Doesn't even bother to close the door behind her.

And Carla's standing there, right in the middle of the pavement, bang in the middle of a Cheetah estate like she's Mother Teresa, holding out her arms. Fuck's sake.

I try to work up some heat, but I know there's not much point, being how I've seen it all before. Flash Carla a new shade of lip-gloss and any discipline goes straight to shit.

Hey Donna, says Lise, sorta quiet.

I follow the look and then we're both staring back into the doorway.

Two round pairs of eyes, not three foot off the floor, Paddington duffel coats all buttoned up, staring back. The

big one's got this Dora the Explorer pulley bag, the babba's got some kinda dog-cum-teddy thing, holds it out to me.

I look back at the van, but I can't tell where Carla ends and Fatboy's old lady begins, so I reckon any help from those two is out of the question.

We can't just leave them, says Lise.

We're not taking them, I says, or we're fucked.

On the way back, it's pretty quiet, Sonn driving, glasses slipping off the end of her nose, leaning over the wheel like Mr Magoo. Carla's got a grip of the new chick, cooing and shushing her all over the place. Then those two weird little kids, four eyes like saucers, sitting right up front in the middle, just staring out.

And all in a wunner I know things just up and got crazy. To be honest I don't know what I was thinking before. Like maybe if we get out of here with his woman Fatboy'd be glad to be rid? Or maybe he's got some other old lady lined up and won't even notice this one's gone? Or maybe he'll just wanna forget how we did him, so he'll pretend it all never happened?

Yeah that's right Donna, as if.