

The
BUSKER
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BELL

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For Orla

BRIGHTON

‘Fuck it,’ I say. ‘It got us a bed for the night and a hot meal.’
‘And a bottle of wine.’

‘Château Shite.’

Neither of us mentions the benzos. We sit underneath the overhang of the promenade on Madeira Drive, eating the greasy kebab scraps we fought the seagulls for. One of the fat bastards we defeated watches us from the stones of the beach, his head twitching from side to side and his throat raising a note that is both question and protest.

‘Here.’ I fling him the curved yellow chilli pepper. ‘That’ll teach you, you beady-eyed wee gobshite.’

‘You didn’t need to do it, though, Rab; we could have managed,’ Sage murmurs.

‘Let it go. We needed the money, simple as that.’

‘Still, not like that.’

I shrug and look out to the pier. All the rides have closed for the night and the neon is starting to fade to ghostly twists and turns out at sea. Shouts and shrieked laughter drift from the beachfront bars, further along the seafront. At the tideline, a group of teenagers is trying to build a fire. They’ve only got damp, rotten wood.

‘I’d been thinking of doing it for a while,’ I say.

‘We could’ve got you a gig instead. There’s a friend of mine up in Kemptown who said...’

He sniffs, then snorts the lie back up before it’s fully out.

'There were other things we could have done, at least.'

'Like what – sell our bodies?' I do a little dance for him, shaking my shoulders. It lets the draught in underneath my blanket. Sage watches dispassionately. He has wrapped his own blanket, stiff with stains and salt air, over his shoulders as a shawl. The dress shirt he wears beneath it bulges open at the bottom and a fold of white stomach, with a scrawled dark signature of hair across it, shows through. He doesn't seem to feel the chill.

'I used to teach a class on social theory – ' he begins.

'Let it go,' I repeat.

'Your guitar,' he continues, 'was your livelihood, your means of production. Give a man a fish and he'll eat for a day, but give a man a fishing rod – '

'Is it not "but teach a man to fish..."'?

'Let me finish.' He gives me his stare. 'Give a man a fishing rod and he'll sell it and buy a fish.'

'Ha.' It's mirthless, a word rather than laughter. 'It seems so, mate, it seems so.'

It wasn't meant to be this way. When I came down from Glasgow I had big plans. There would have been no chance of me pawning the acoustic guitar Maddie gave me for my eighteenth for the sake of a bed, bath, bite, bottle and benzo. Maybe I'd auction it off after the second album, to fund the coke habit or to crinkle handfuls of cash on to casino cloths – for charity, even – but I'd never have pawned it. Not for fifty quid. Not that guitar, the one from Maddie.

'It's not even the gigs,' Sage says. 'It's the busking.'

Since we arrived in Brighton, I've spent my days sitting outside the shops on Church Road or at the underpass on Trafalgar Street, leading from the train station down to North Laine, picking out folk songs and covers but avoiding my own material. It's a chore, scraping seventy-two pence in loose change from a Springsteen song or a pound coin for some Dougie MacLean. I don't tell Sage that, though. I don't want to admit to him that I'm sick of it.

He's taken a deep wheeze of a breath. It's his windbag way of launching into a lecture or supplication: get it all out in one go so that no one can interrupt him.

'Busking is your way of participating in consumer culture, your only marketable skill in this capitalist system, the only thing that you can trade off.' He takes a breath. 'That guitar was a symbol as much as anything, Rab – of your willingness to participate in the sham and shame of it all.'

The seagull has haughtily hobbled away from the chilli pepper. I feel a flicker of frustration about that, because I'd harboured this vague notion that he might swallow the whole thing, pause to blink at us in alarm, and then explode into a fluttering of feathers. No such luck, though. He lives to fight another day.

'I'm proud of you,' Sage concludes. 'In a way.'

'Left with only the blanket on my back and the song in my heart.' And the single benzo I kept back from last night. Sage doesn't know about it. I tucked it into the top of my sock as soon as I realised that the pawn money wouldn't stretch to more than one night of the high life.

'The kids down there have a guitar.' Sage points at the shadows on the shore. The fire beside them wisps out smoke, but there are no flames to speak of. They're all probably educated to Oxbridge-entry level, with Duke of Ed. awards and internships and gap years abroad stitched into their CVs like Scout badges, but not one of them can build a fire.

'What are you saying – steal it off them?' I ask.

'I would never say that.' Sage picks at his lip underneath the fringe of his grey-streaked beard. Dry skin, maybe even the beginning of a cold sore, comes loose and is flicked to the side. 'But you could ask them for a go, maybe, to keep your hand in.'

The boy who is plucking away at the guitar is making a sound that the chilli-canny seagull would be proud of, and someone is running their mouth up and down a harmonica

by way of accompaniment. If I did go over there, if they were to hand me their instruments, I could give them a song that might earn me a swig from their cheap chest-pain cider, or a toke from the broken bone of their joint. Equally, though, I could earn myself a kicking. Sage should know that as well as anyone; he's suffered more beat-downs than me in his time. He's been woken with spit and piss. Or by being dragged down the street in his sleeping bag. You can't rely on strangers to leave you in peace, never mind show you kindness.

'I've no interest,' I say, 'not really. Tell me a story instead, Sage. I'll close my eyes and you can tell me a story and I'll see if I can sleep.'

I know this suggestion will please him. He used to be an associate lecturer at a university up in London. There were half-filled halls of students listening to him once upon a time. If he closes his own eyes, if he recalls his research word for word, then he can be back in academia for a moment or two.

'Have I told you about the factory owner in China?' he asks.

I shake my head, keeping my eyes closed. It doesn't sound like 'once upon a time', but it might be perfect for sending me to sleep.

'Well, just outside this city in China...' He clears his throat. 'Just outside is this factory where they make electronic components for these high-end American smartphones...'

His voice changes, shifts to a lower register. It's a radio voice; it reminds me of the books on tape I used to listen to as a child. There's a rough rasp to it that mixes melodiously with the shushing of the sea. If I listen imperfectly, if I mingle and meld the two together, then it reminds me of the whispers Maddie used in the moments before sleep.

'A robotic arm could do the work, but labour is cheap and injuries are ignored so they use men, women and children instead. Children especially. They only need to say they're of age. The manager is too fond of their nimble fingers to ask for documentation...'

My mind drifts to a memory of my last cup of coffee: holding it between the heels of my hands, curling my fingers in towards the scalding polystyrene.

'The American company eventually gives the smartphone a limited release in the city: only a hundred will be sold. And the factory owner finds out about this and decides to take advantage – he wants to buy up the phones and sell them on at three times the price. So, when the launch day arrives, he has a long queue of these factory workers waiting, each of them with a white armband on so the minders can identify them...'

Maybe it's the caffeine that's keeping me awake. I don't even like coffee, not really. But it keeps you warm and it keeps you walking that bit longer. Until, eventually, you find somewhere to slump and sleep.

'Those in the queue without an armband – businessmen and trendy types – catch wind of this and start protesting, and it builds to a riot. The store doesn't open and the phone isn't sold, and there's outrage all round. Everyone turns on the workers: the minders beat them for giving away the scheme, thinking of the loss of the bonus the factory owner promised them; and the businessmen and trendy types shout, "What were you queuing for when you don't *want* the phones, don't *need* them the way we do".'

It doesn't lull me to sleep as Maddie's voice used to. It's an emotionless story, without soul, that's delivered in that flat, factual way Sage has. He's expecting me to join the dots; he's led me to the water but he's damned if he's going to tell me how to drink.

Opening my eyes, I glance across at my older companion. His own eyes are tightly closed; he's probably imagining standing silently in front of a seminar group and waiting for the sharpest of the students to pass comment. I reach down into my sock for the last benzo. It has a stray thread caught in its markings, so I pick that off and slide the pill under my tongue. Then I look across at Sage again. He has one eye open, watching me. There is accusation in his stare.

‘What’s your point?’ I ask, peevishly. ‘That the factory owner was a prick? That both the minders and the workers were underpaid?’

He shakes his head. ‘No, you’ve missed the point, as usual.’

‘What was the point?’

‘You just took a pill, I saw you.’

I shrug. ‘It was the last one.’

‘You could have shared it, though.’

‘Let me sleep,’ I say, and curl myself in against the concrete curve of the wall. The change of position ruptures the cocoon of my blanket, but my thoughts begin to slip and slide towards sleep in spite of the numbness of my fingers and toes. The shifting sea advances up the stones of the beach and washes over me, but the tide is warm and it carries me off in the undercurrent –

I am along the shore at the nightclub beyond the car park, standing on the stage and watching the crowd beneath me, as they lap up against the footlights. Their murmurings are a constant background noise, occasionally interrupted by a screeched call or cry. Then I strike the first chord and all becomes calm. They part, right down the middle; they fold away to either side to create a path for Maddie, who stands at the back of the room, distinctive with her cropped blonde hair and that olive-green summer dress that falls from her shoulders and has to be hitched back up.

I don’t play beyond the first chord because I realise that I’m holding the guitar Maddie gave me, with the untrimmed strings spraying out from the tuning pegs. My fingers fall from the fret and I step forward to the microphone.

‘I have a story to tell,’ I say. ‘About this guitar.’

The crowd draws a breath. Maddie takes a step forward, then stands, waiting, in the centre of the parted sea of people. Her widened brown eyes are on me, those eyes that make me feel as if I’m on the cusp of saying something profound,

that the next thing to come out of my mouth will change everything utterly. For better or worse.

‘Maddie,’ I say, ‘I had to pawn the guitar, this guitar.’

There are a couple of hisses and catcalls from the crowd on either side of her.

‘I had to pawn it, because I needed a bed and some pills.’

‘And food, don’t forget!’ someone shouts.

‘And food,’ I concede, with a smile. ‘But I got it back, Maddie. I must have.’ I wave it in the air in front of me. ‘It was only a matter of time until I got it back.’

Maddie is still looking up at me, but she’s not smiling. Instead there’s this look of intense concentration on her face, with the wrinkle of a frown on her forehead. I’ve only ever seen her look that way once before. I need to continue before the crowd, who are losing interest, burst their banks and she is carried away on their current.

‘So I went back to the pawn shop,’ I say, ‘and there was this seagull on the counter. And he told me that –’

‘Seagulls can’t talk!’ someone objects.

‘Fine,’ I say into the microphone. ‘He let it be known that I could have it back in exchange for a yellow chilli pepper. Just a single yellow chilli pepper.’

Her frown has deepened. She glances away, off towards the back of the room as if looking for someone else.

‘And so I went searching around Brighton for a chilli pepper,’ I say. ‘It’s not that I didn’t value your gift, or that I think it’s only worth the chilli pepper, but the seagull –’

‘Are these meant to be lyrics?’ someone shouts, from the crowd.

The booing starts towards the back of the room, but it builds as it reaches the front and it breaks as it reaches the edge of the stage. Hands stretch out to clutch at my trainers, dragging my feet out from under me. ‘That was meaningless!’ they chant. ‘Mean-ing-less! Mean-ing-less!’

The guitar has fallen to the side and is being driven, again and again, against the microphone stand until the wood

splinters and breaks. Lying on my back, I twist my body and reach out a hand towards the wreckage of it, but the crowd have lifted me and are pulling me down from the stage, pulling me under, the weight of them on me as the air is squeezed from my lungs. I gasp and grasp and –

I wake with a crick in my neck that can't be stretched away and a sense of rising panic that doesn't fully leave me even after I've rubbed at my eyes and spied the yellow chilli pepper lying discarded on the concrete, with the seagull nowhere in sight.

There's no way of telling the time, but there's the soft orange glow of sunrise out at sea and the first yawning groans of traffic from up on the main road.

Sitting upright, I look across at Sage, who has slumped forward on to his knees and is snoring softly and trailing a line of saliva down the leg of his well-worn corduroy trousers. He is middle-aged, although I have never asked for specifics. His brown-grey hair is greasy and lank and settles into slicks at his sideburns so that it seems to melt like plastic into the untidy tangles of his beard. The skin that shows around his nose and eyes has been browned by the sun and wind, weathered rather than wrinkled. His eyes, when they are open, have enough by way of sharpness to hint at his intelligence, but the way he spills out from the top and sides of his charity-shop clothes means that he will never again be called handsome. Even after a wash and a shave, even with a suit and a dousing of aftershave, he'd still carry himself with that awkward loping gait that shows the weight he's been lugging around all these years.

'How does a homeless man get to be so fat?' I mutter to myself, half-expecting a chorus of boos for my unkindness, for my lack of charity. There is no reaction, though. The crowd has gone. Maddie too.

I'm back to grey. To a day of walking until my feet pulse with pain, then resting until the cold gnaws. Of seeking

something of substance to dull the nerves, numb my skin and draw myself inwards. Enough warmth to see me through until I can find a kipping point – beneath a child’s slide in a playground, in a doorway with a covering of cardboard turning to mulch, or a shelter down by the seafront – where I know I’ll wake with a policeman kicking at the soles of my shoes, telling me to move on.

Rising to my feet, I wrap the blanket tightly around my shoulders and begin to shuffle towards the stones of the beach. There is a tap beside the oyster stall and the ice-cold water from it will remove the fur that seems to have grown, like mould, across the surface of my teeth during the night. Collecting the water in my cupped hands, I drink. The water tastes faintly of last night’s kebab. I belch deeply and roll the flavour around on my tongue.

The fire down on the shore is out, and there’s a spattering of rain starting to hiss out any remaining embers, but I decide to make my way down anyway, to see if the youngsters have left anything worth salvaging. They might have set down a sloshing of cider, or a cast-off roach that has enough clinging to it for an early morning smoke.

I lift the plastic cider bottles, but they’ve drowned their half-smoked joints in the alcohol so that both are useless. Swinging my arm, I lob a bottle up and out towards the sea, watching as the liquid inside spills out in an arc. A seagull, startled by the movement, lets out a scolding cry and swoops off to another part of the beach.

In among the charred wood and blackened stone of the fire, something glints. Like a magpie, I’m drawn to it. I wipe ash away from it until I can see its markings. It’s the harmonica. A nice one: twelve-hole, chromatic, with a wood inlay. It is warm to the touch as I lift it.

Holding it an inch or so from my mouth, I blow up and down the length of it. Fractured notes, incomplete scales, sound out. I take a corner of my blanket and polish at the metal until the scorched scars from the fire fade. I raise it to

my lips and blow a chord. Just one chord. And then, in the early morning, with no way of telling the time precisely, I begin to sing with all the breath in my lungs. The words are caught by the wind and swept along the length of deserted Brighton beach.