

## *Humanities*



The Tinder app chirruped gaily in my pocket like a little digital blackbird. I had matched with Seb, 27. Seb had studied English Literature at Durham, and was now living in Glasgow for reasons unspecified. He was handsome, but in one of his pictures he was wearing one of those T-Shirts that lists famously associated names in hip vertical text (John & Paul & George & Ringo, etc), except his said:

**Derrida &**

**Baudrillard &**

**Foucault &**

**Žižek.**

This immediately burst the delicate bubble of denial I preferred to keep suspended for as long as possible when it came to the fit ones: he was clearly, on some level - on every level, perhaps - a cock. Dithering, I zoomed in on a couple of his other photos. He had jagged, daintily fragile white teeth and a chiselled jawline – chiselled enough that I could probably forget the implications of the T-Shirt if a coital scenario were to present itself.

Reluctant to participate in the inevitable and vastly unsexy fellow-students-of-literature-circle-jerk opening dance, my fingers worked deftly to take my degree details off my profile. Too late. Another chirrup, slightly different in tonal quality this time - a chaffinch, perhaps - heralded a message:

*Cathy! I would have guessed you were a fellow lit student. Us humanities folk can sniff each other out like wolves.*

In my mind I circled the words I took exception to ('lit,' 'humanities,' 'folk,') in some sort of Star-Trekky digital red pen, and sent the message back to him. I considered and rejected a

string of hollow, enabling replies incorporating Wuthering-Heights references I'd used several times in the past, in the course of similarly dismal exchanges. Eventually I went back into profile settings and deleted my main display photo (me in a slightly insipid double-skirted floral dress, long red hair falling in waves to my waist), and replaced it with a more recent image. In it my lips were drenched in gloss and parted in an overt display of sex-doll sexuality, and I was wearing a top I'd ordered on ASOS that was really, technically, underwear. I put my phone back in my pocket and made myself a hot chocolate. Ostentatious peacocking was a good acid test, I found. It separated the talkers from the ones with hard-ons they actually wanted to do something about. After about ten minutes my phone pinged again.

*Blimey.*



We met at The Old Hairdressers on Renfield Lane – his suggestion – there was something on later that he wanted to see. I decided not to Google the event. It was important that my agenda – the vampiric consumption of his jawline – remained clear and unsullied by the prospect of having to interact with multiple ‘book-smart’ hipsters.

Seb greeted me with a quite charming, low-key ‘hi’. He put hand lightly on my shoulder as we went up to the bar, where he paid for two beers. We sat down in a corner, him facing the back wall (and me), while I had a view of the rest of the bar, which glittered and undulated behind his head. I relaxed a little bit. He asked me about myself, was attractively vague and modest about his own circumstances. It still wasn't entirely clear why he was in Glasgow, but he seemed happy to be. He liked the people. They were, he said, ‘less, sort of, repressed’ than they were down South.

The bar staff were lively, messing around with a playlist of watered-down indie disco

music from our teenage years – The Kooks, Razorlight, The Wombats. I started to feel pleasantly drunk and nostalgic. I imagined him when he was fourteen, in a sunny bedroom in the London suburbs, putting on ‘She Moves In Her Own Way’ for a pretty blonde girl with a snub-nose and rosebud lips. I giggled to myself: it was nice. I didn’t resent him. I liked that he came from a different world, a world I’d seen on E4 and in Gurinder Chadha films, but had never inhabited myself. I chided myself for my initial cynicism, and as the beers went down I was really looking forward to sleeping with him.

Eventually, inevitably, we got to talking about our experiences as undergraduates.

‘Yeah, I mean, I was part of a couple of creative writing societies in my, sort of, second year and, you know, it was fine, but I just don’t find that environment particularly... didactic in a helpful way?’ said Seb.

I wasn’t entirely sure what that meant, but it didn’t matter; I was nicely drunk now: the happy, trusting kind of drunk that makes you feel as though everything you say will resonate with the other person so completely, they’ll think you’re reading their mind.

‘Oh fuck, god, creative writing classes,’ I agreed. ‘Here’s something I noticed when I was doing creative writing classes at uni, right. Lots of not-very-good writers have stock ‘this-is-really-good-writing’ phrases that allow them to hoodwink the undiscerning masses into thinking they have talent.’

Faint lines of surprise had etched themselves around Seb’s eyes. I’d let him do most of the talking thus far. I read his silence as amused beguilement and soldiered on.

‘Let me think of one, right... Right, so if they’re writing a sex scene, and it’s a blowjob, rather than write, ‘I sucked him off for a bit,’ they’ll write, ‘I trailed my tongue down the length of him,’ or, you know, ‘he pushed inside me’ becomes ‘he moved until his full length was inside me.’ People read this and think, ‘holy shit that’s fucking brilliant’. God, I mean, I love writing, but don’t you think so many people who do it are such *pricks*.

I knew people at uni who were into writing, and that whole ‘arts-admin’ kind of scene –

not very nice people, a lot of them... some of them got stuff published, some are about to, some never will, but they're all bloody... Tweeting each other in support of each other's massive manuscripts that they claim to have devoured in the space of a day!? And I'm seeing this, thinking, am I missing something? You're writing your OWN novel - how the fucking fuck do you have time to read all your 'friends'' unpublished manuscripts?

Or, you know, like, writers who arrange erotic literature nights when it's totally obvious that they're totally fucking repressed, and you're going, am I the only one who can see that this person is **TOTALLY FUCKING REPRESSED?! Or when people say to you, you have to write out all the crap first. 'A lot of it will have to go', they say. Okay, but what if everything I write and find to be organic and raw and want to keep, is what everyone else would call the warm-up?**

And *BIOS!* My friend got some of her writing published in an anthology and they asked her to write a bio and she wrote, you know, went to uni at bla-bla and then did bla-bla and works at bla-bla. So, when the anthology came out we looked at the bio pages and they all had stuff like, 'after surviving two years of Tindering in Newcastle, Jerome felt it was only right (and in the interests of public welfare, ho ho!) for him to share his experiences,' and we're like, fuck's sake Jerome! You wrote that about yourself! You total prick! It's this weird suspension of disbelief thing - are we all supposed to pretend that someone has written that ABOUT Jerome, like, has he got some sort of superfan who writes his bios for him at this very very fucking fledgling stage of his career—'

Seb, I realised, was staring at me. Unbeguiled. Unamused. My breathing and heart-rate slowed as it dawned on me: the golden glow of mutual empathy I'd thought was growing between us had been entirely fabricated by my beer-addled brain.

He laughed lightly through his nose and shifted in his chair to look behind him. People our age and a bit younger were heading up the fairy-lit staircase to the 'mezzanine' area to the 'event'. I'd forgotten about the event.

'Yeah'. He laughed lightly and cleared his throat in one fluid, practised mannerism.

‘So, do you want to go through?’ he asked.

I tightened my grip around my glass. The beer was warm now, and so was my hand, giving the weird sensation that the glass was bending slightly against the pressure of my palm.

‘Yes! If you like. What’s on?’

‘It’s a spoken word event – some incredible voices – I’ve seen quite a bit of their stuff online. There’s one girl who’s just... absolutely brilliant.’

I looked back at the crowd flowing up the stairs. Bringing up the rear was Rose Keller, an obnoxious and unfriendly girl I recalled from my university tutorials. She was speaking loudly to a wan-looking friend in brothel creepers and black lipstick. The word ‘gender’ drifted down to me several times as ‘Golden Touch’ faded out over the bar speakers.

Spoken fucking word.



When we entered the ‘mezzanine area’ there were lots of people sitting cross-legged on bedraggled, grubby-looking cushions on the floor. The first thing I noticed was that none of them had bought any booze. I gulped nervously at my beer, wishing I’d bought another two as back-up. There weren’t many cushions left for Seb and I. Instinctively, I felt I’d be safer standing in the doorway, but he had other plans.

‘Do you want to go in the middle there,’ he said, ‘and I’ll, sort of, hover near the front?’

I noticed that Rose Keller was also, sort of, hovering near the front.

Seb didn’t wait for a response, so I wound my way awkwardly through the mass of angular limbs and politically correct tote bags, eventually finding a spot between two middle-aged women, one of whom I recognised as Joanna Silversmith, one of my tutors at Glasgow. My heart gave a little leap of relief – a familiar face! O joy! A tongue-in-cheek Socratic exchange, perhaps. At the very least, a smile. I tapped her shoulder.

‘Hello. Do you mind if I squeeze in?’

She looked me up and down nastily.

‘*Squeeze?* You’re a rake darling, sure, but morbidly obese I ain’t.’

Her companion, a blue-haired, slack-mouthed creature, let out a Hallowe’en cackle.

Several others in our vicinity turned to me, accusatory looks in their eyes. I sunk onto a cushion, feeling the heat radiating from my cheeks.

Rose Keller swayed up to the microphone, her salmon-pink dress floating around her as though her bottom half had been submerged in a tank of crystalline water. I glanced over at Seb, who was staring at her with the glauk expression of one recently fellated by Christina Hendricks. A Christina Hendricks who’d just read a Cosmo article about the importance of perineum work.

‘Hi, everyone,’ said Rose too loudly, in her best ‘take-my-picture-by-the-pool-cos-I’m-the-next-big-thing’ voice.

‘So, uh, *yeah!* When I first came to Glasgow I thought – fuck – sure, it’ll be an experience, but in terms of the poetry scene, I’m a Bristol girl, so, you know...’

She trailed off coquettishly. A ripple of knowing, indulgent laughter spread across the room.

‘So, uh, *yeah!* I just thought, let’s bring a voice to this city! We have some fantastic artists here tonight - so, without further...whatever (we all hate a cliché in here!), let me introduce the gorgeous Guy Banks.’

Guy Banks was from Reading. He had things to say about the gentrification of Finnieston, where he had been living for two months. He stood too close to the microphone. I could hear the spit clicking about in his mouth as he spoke.

Being *not a poet* myself, I was conscious that I was somewhat ill-equipped to criticise Guy-Banks-from-Reading. Instinctively, though, I feel that poetry should flow - it should have a natural pace that compliments its meaning, so that it permeates the listener, seeps in, nourishes, lingers. Guy had adopted that unfortunate trend of delivering his lines with a monotonous,

contrived rhythm that does nothing for me whatsoever – the hairs on the back of my neck remain unruffled, my heart still, my soul unmoved. It was a trend growing more popular by the second – teens with posters of Kate Tempest on their ceilings, Nationwide building society using spoken-word performers to narrate their cutting-edge ad campaigns about the grafters toiling to keep our economy 'afloat'. In theory, of course, it's all 'good'. Liberal messages communicated in new, imaginative ways. In practice, though, I found it irritating, insincere and boring.

Next, Yvonne Harper from Leeds shouted very loudly for several minutes about tampons.

I looked around me, at Yvonne's wide-eyed audience, and wondered if what she was saying actually meant something to them – was I in the minority, or were they aware that to be part of this... 'scene,' motion, whatever the fuck it was, they had simply had to learn to look as though it resonated.

Rose Keller was last to read. She swooshed up to the stage, fully aware that she was commanding a room full of people to whom she was the ultimate prize. This time, when she spoke, it was in a softer, ethereal, barely-there voice. She knew what she was doing. I found myself glancing around at the mens' crotches for signs of movement.

Rose's poem was an aggrieved account of being cat-called in the street (why the fuck do men think they have the right to indulge in such behaviour, it's 2018, we are not sirloins, etc, etc). Again, in principle, I agreed. But I could not help but suspect that Rose had fabricated this incident in her mind, not as a way of positively countering the lascivious and intimidating behaviour of men, but in fact, as a way of reminding her audience of one thing, and one thing alone: 'I'm a beautiful young woman and men want me.'

Rose knew she couldn't just say that outright so instead, she has created a story vilifying a fictitious man and dressed it up as being an ethical and socially cleansing piece of work. This girl was clearly a straight-up narcissist, and she'd turned a roomful of her generation into an Oxytocin factory, inspiring the collective creative 'petites morts' of 'Glasgow's' bring young

things.

She finished, spent. There was a short silence followed by sombre applause and stricken, 'I'm-so-sorry-that-happened-to-you' expressions.

'We have five more minutes, so let's open up the floor,' breathed Rose.

I knew that if I went up there, got up to that microphone and said what I believed to be the crux of Rose's agenda, I would be shot down in flames. I wanted to explain, to scream it: Yes, I was appalled by any man who took advantage of his physical or social superiority over any woman. Yes, it should be fought against. And yet, I had also noticed a burgeoning trend of women themselves taking advantage of their own perceived inferiority, and using it against men in a multitude of manipulative and extremely dangerous ways. And it scared the shit out of me. I sat in silence, digging my nails into my palms as Joanna Silversmith practically vaulted over the huddled cushion-dwellers to bellow on about Virginia Woolf's vagina. Eventually the venue owners chucked everyone out. I gave them a small, grateful smile. They glared and took my glass out of my hands.

'Fantastic, wasn't it?' came Seb's voice in the throng as we were leaving.

'Yes, yes. Lovely,' I mumbled.

We pushed outside. I offered him a cigarette and he accepted absent-mindedly, his eyes flitting about like glimmering fish. A flash of hatred seized me.

'Why did you move here? To Glasgow I mean,' I asked him.

The swift piscine eyes met mine briefly. Any warmth I'd thought I'd seen in them at the start of the evening was gone. The implicit dismissal of his gaze was quite startling.

'My parents are a bit Tory. I thought it would piss them off.'

A boy standing near us had overheard Seb's comment, and guffawed towards us.

'Me too, mate. And I did Lit, to top it off. They're like, Humanities degree? Sort of, what are you going to do with that? Teach?'

Seb laughed. 'I know. But, I mean, after seeing something like that, you just think, sort

of, like, God, us Humanities folk have such a lot of heart.’

I could lose it now. Really go for it:

‘WHY DO YOU HAVE TO SAY ‘HUMANITIES’? WHY CAN’T YOU JUST SAY YOU STUDIED FUCKING ENGLISH, OR SOCIOLOGY? DON’T YOU REALISE HOW ALIENATING AND MEANINGLESS IT ALL SOUNDS? OR – OR – ARE YOU PUTTING US ALL IN THE SAME BRACKET DELIBERATELY BECAUSE YOU HAVE A MASSIVE CHIP ON YOUR SHOULDER? BECAUSE YOU KNOW OUR CHANCES OF MAKING ANY FUCKING MONEY WHATSOEVER ARE CONSIDERABLY SLIMMER THAN THEY ARE FOR PEOPLE WHO CHOSE, SAY, ACCOUNTANCY OR... I DON’T KNOW, FUCKING... FUCKING... ORTHODONTICS? OH YES, US ‘HUMANITIES FOLK’ ARE ALL IN IT TOGETHER. MAYBE WE WON’T GET A JOB OUT OF IT, BUT WE’RE STILL MORE ENLIGHTENED THAN EVERYONE ELSE, AND MORE UNIQUE AND SPECIAL IN EVERY WAY, REBELLING FROM OUR HIDEOUS, COLD, ‘A BIT TORY’ PARENTS. YEAH, WELL. APPLES. TREES. DON’T FALL FAR FROM. I HATE TO TELL YOU, MATE, BUT THAT SHIT IS IN YOUR BLOOD WHETHER YOU LIKE IT OR NOT. YOU MAY NOT BE A TORY, BUT YOU’RE SHREWD JUST LIKE YOUR DADDY IS, AND COLD AS FUCKING ICE LIKE MUM. AND THERE-IN-LIES-THE-RUB.’

Instead, I smoked my cigarette down until the filter burnt my lips and the pad of my thumb. Rose emerged onto the lane wearing a suedette bat-wing coat. She was pretending to listen to her black-lipped friend from earlier, but I could see a flash of impatience in her eyes – Rose was in the market now for something else. They crossed the lane and sparked up, standing away from the crowd so that she could be fully seen. Clever girl, I thought, as Seb and several others clocked her at once.

‘I’m just gonna... eh, stub my fag out,’ I told Seb, motioning vaguely to an ashtray on a table a little up the lane.

‘Right, yeah,’ he said, not looking at me.

I was gone, flying up Renfield Street and back towards my flat. There was a volatile energy in the Glasgow night that scared me. My skirt was short and the night air cold; I felt eyes go towards my thighs, I felt the wind between my legs. I was at Charing Cross within minutes, working against the flow of people making their way to Sauchiehall Street, to revelry. I could just allow myself to flow in to a bar, in to Driftwood, one shot, two shots, alone, then not alone. My thin legs carried me on through two sets of lights, onto Woodlands Road. I fell into my close and gulped down the chilled, damp air.

The light in the hallway of the flat was harsh. It showed up the blue veins in my hands, which unsettled me, so I switched it off and clip-clopped through to the gentle glow of my bedroom. I'd made my bed that morning with snowy white sheets. Virginal – too virginal, I'd felt – so I'd unravelled my pink shawl speckled with embroidered figs and thrown it over the bottom half of the duvet.

'Oh, right, yeah, figs. Nice. See, the thing about D.H. Lawrence—' I'd imagined Seb saying, before I silenced him. Or – maybe – if he'd been nice, if he'd been *actually quite funny*, if he'd been the one, he'd have held the scarf up to the light mid-snog and said in his best Alan Partridge,

'Figs. Is that a... uhh... euphemism?'

I'd left all the lights off except the lamp I kept on my nightstand, which omitted a soft rosy luminescence. Everything else – laptop cables, stray knickers, magazines, had been shoved under the bed; so certain had I been that I would be sharing my room that night, so keen was I to turn it into one giant, pulsating female appendage. (Yes, Alan. It was a euphemism. Yes.)

I caught a glimpse of myself in my mirror. There was a feral, banshee look about me; my eyes were dark, a livid red blossom was climbing from my cleavage up my neck. I walked closer to my reflection, put my hands on my breasts. With my long pinkie nail I drew a bright red line across my throat, dragging harder at the last moment so that tiny beads of blood came to the

surface of my skin. I slapped my throat once, twice, and looked down at the fine trail of blood on my palm. *Not enough. It's never enough.*

I snaked my hand down under the fine material of my skirt, formed a fist with my fingers and pressed it hard against my clitoris. I could tell immediately from its bad-tempered response that I would not be blessed with an orgasm tonight. The novel mystery of someone else's touch, perhaps, could have coaxed one out. But not my own. Not now. I clenched my teeth and let out a low, animal growl.

'There are two of her,' I remember my mum saying to a nurse. There was a frightened look in her eye. 'She's... she changes.'

If I really were a banshee, I remember thinking, I'd transform myself into a bat-girl and smash out of my bedroom window, shrouded in a cloud of undulating black smoke. Up, up I'd fly, over the *Sainsbury's Local* and through the city night, leaving a trail of shadowy sexual mischief in my wake. George Michael would wake from his slumber and provide a luxuriously forbidding, glittering version of 'Fastlove' just for me: my personal soundtrack. He'd know that my bat-self would perceive in full the profound loneliness of that song – not the upbeat disco number others took it for, but dark, so very dark.

('How could you be lonely if you were George Michael?' one of his fans had asked in a documentary. 'You'd be with George Michael *all the time.*')

*In the absence of security, I made my way into the night.*

Eventually the haze of smoke around me would clear. My wings would carry me back through my bedroom window and I would curl up in my virginal white sheets, spent and peaceful – human again, and as whole as I could possibly be.

I was just sane enough in that moment to accept that supernatural banshee antics were not a workable Plan A. My most desired activities thus eliminated, I knew I had to find a way back to functional, sensible me that did not involve two bottles of red wine and nicking an artery.

I walked closer to the mirror. I closed my curtains to the harsh streetlight orange. My face turned softened in the pink glow of my bedroom. I pulled my black lace dress over my head in one movement. I breathed in, out, slowly, slowly, as I clotted pad after pad with thick black mascara. With bleary, slightly burning eyes, I noticed the DVD I'd put on my bed for post-coital vegetation time. It's 'Local Hero'. I shuffled over to my old DVD/telly player and stick it in. Mark Knopfler's soundtrack oozed from the staticky speaker, drifted to each cold corner of the room, warmed them. Warmed me.

(‘Is that Knopfler?’ the nice Seb might have said into my hair, absently. I'd have loved him for knowing).

There's one track called 'The Ceilidh and the Northern Lights,' which is played over a montage of a ceilidh... and the Northern Lights. A young Denis Lawson swings his wife around a windswept Aberdeenshire hall. People drink whisky, sing into microphones, snog. Laugh. Outside the village hall, apart from the churning sea, there is peace. I fell asleep that night, trying my best to think about that beach, that sublime Northern sky. I fell asleep trying not to lose hope.

☾★

by Rosa Barbour