



Lights Out in Wonderland

DBC Pierre

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Per els somnis d'una nit

If your ethical model defeats you,
change the model.

*When sewers burst, their mire to spew,
Our road to foul swells must succumb;
Flying kiddies will gather without ado,
For a scamper and splash in the scum;
Now society cracks under similar laws,
Gushing wit, truth and reason like pee;
Yet as her bog settles across our floors,
Neither scampers nor splashes you see;
This want of passion disgraces our day,
Therefore history implores me and you:
To attend! Let's woo this reckless decay,
And romp through an empire's last spew.*

LONDON



I

There isn't a name for my situation. Firstly because I decided to kill myself. And then because of this idea:

I don't have to do it immediately.

Whoosh – through a little door. It's a limbo.

I need never answer the phone again or pay a bill. My credit score no longer matters. Fears and compulsions don't matter. Socks don't matter. Because I'll be dead. And who am I to die? A microwave chef. A writer of pamphlets. A product of our time. A failed student. A faulty man. A bad poet. An activist in two minds. A drinker of chocolate milk, and when there's no chocolate, of strawberry and sometimes banana.

In times geared to the survival of the fittest – not the fittest.

Ah well. I've always avoided mirrors but here, naked in a room with a sink and a mirror, I steal a glance. Whoosh – the weasel is gone. Suddenly I'm a sphinx with choir-boy eyes, as luminous and rude as a decadent old portrait in oils.

Because nothing matters any more.

Rehab isn't the place for this kind of inspiration, if you can possibly help it.

By way of rejoicing I pee in the sink – after all, a porcelain appliance plumbed into a drain – then flush it with tap water, which I feel shows refinement. Reason and refinement are shown in my last living hours. Proof that I'm not deranged, that I came from good people. Or at least, from stories of good people.

Dressing quickly, I don't bother to wash, it doesn't matter. I only pause to stretch at the window and marvel. My depression's gone. Whoosh – down a rabbit hole it went. Everything's whoosh. That's the rush of this limbo.* Of course it only works when the decision to die is final. Which mine is.

The reason is simple: that of the many things I was supposed to be and have and do, I am, and have, and have done precisely none of them. I stand in the thrashing wake of modern life, watching it speed away. It may sound pathetic except for one thing: it isn't that I lack inner forces. I have inner forces, more than enough. But they never found expression.

They're unexpressed forces, more pointless than no force at all.

In the course of my writing it might seem that I recommend this fatal path to you. Well, I do recommend it. Make up your own mind according to what you see, but in the meantime I count you a sympathetic cohort. And I say this to you: everyone regrets leaving a party early, hearing laughter from a salon behind them. Death must feel that way. But I don't feel it at all; because this party's over. Its bottles are empty. Kegs are spitting foam. Our empire of shopping is in its last twitching throes. Bye-bye free markets, farewell terms and conditions, ciao bogus laughter, ha ha, whoop, wa-heh. The last revellers are the dregs we see at any free event, now vomiting wine. It's not regret but pride I feel at detecting the state of play, and getting out in good time.

Adieu then, Modern Day, adieu. Another chance to prove ourselves capable of self-mastery, and hence worthy of freedom, is gone. Deep down we know it well; for over a decade we've merely reheated the past, glorifying our hundred best moments over and

* What is this limbo? A kind of detachment from the object world, a dance-mix of what we taste in moments of shock. Already I sense that it has an envelope, a zone pushed by fear, pulled by comforting oblivion. Science would call it *Dissociation*; but in life we have a choice between the clinical and the romantic – and *Limbo* is the romantic choice. In case you need arguments for choosing romance over science, remember this: science still doesn't know why we sleep.

over like the elderly with snaps of their frolicking days, unconsciously saying goodbye.*

Now watch the lights dim in Wonderland.

Whoosh. What a decadence.

A ball plocks between racquets somewhere outside, and to me it's a ticking clock, uneven like the real time of nature. I must vanish from here – quickly, before anyone sets to work on my state of mind. I'm off to live large for an hour or two. Because I'm worth it, ha ha. As for the behaviour my limbo suggests, just look around. If we're to follow our peers, then surely we need no greater morals than them.

It means carte blanche for Gabriel Brockwell.

First things first – I'll track down the most accomplished profligate I know: my old friend Nelson Smuts, a man never far from wine and debauch. With him as my wingman I'll turn these last hours into a perfect miniature of the age I leave behind, nothing less than a last wanton plunge to oblivion.

Ah, decadence. I smile out through the window. The rehabilitation facility sits festering like a family secret in countryside north of London. It has grottoes, shrubberies and empty ponds coated in slime. Inmates – so-called clients – drift around sucking leaf-mould – so-called fresh air – and wearing trousers that don't touch their legs but hover emptily over the wrong kinds of shoe.

My room isn't locked. The passage outside is ripe with the mechano-pubic scent of vacuum-cleaning. I plunge through it as late sun hits the building, a golden blast that lights galaxies of dust against the foyer's dark. Whoosh. The Ancients would call

* Yes, it's over: profit won the game, but like an infection, killed its host. We were the host. Quality died out because we relinquished the right to filter our own choices; profit became the filter of all choice. Truth died out because we no longer filter true experience; media profit became the filter. The infection found every human receptor, bound to every protein of existence, sucking them dry to feed corporate tumours immunised against us by government. Now the host is a carcass, the market a bacterial enzyme. So adieu!

this a good sign. It seems big decisions call signs from the divine Enthusiasms, perhaps a nod of light or a frown of shadow when we act momentarily. Those ironic and whimsical gods must be like a fluid all around us. A limbo would surely attract them – and a limbo before death must be the very spout of their vortex. Who knows if they favour life over death, if they give signs along the path of an adventure, or save their lessons for the end.

Come, though – we'll see.

A long-faced girl slumps behind reception. She watches me, hoping I won't approach. Whoosh – I swirl through the light towards her. My shyness is gone. The secret that I will die makes it irrelevant, so I go up till her face is in shadow, and ask for a pen and paper. We'll take notes – yes! – while everything's so clear. As the girl rummages around, I see check-out forms sitting behind the counter, and reach for one. She recoils, as if my arm has a mighty force field. But then I see she's a person who flinches at everything. All movement is a slight surprise to her. She puts down a notepad, arranges a pen beside it, and stands back while I square the check-out form on the counter, frowning with intent. With a flourish I take up the pen:

'All happiness not derived from intoxicants,' I write, '– is false.'

Her mouth opens slowly: 'O-kay. I might just get David, or Rosemary – who have you been seeing – David, or Rosemary?'

Her face seems to grow longer, melting towards the counter with every word. This is a Salvador Dalí girl, someone to fold over the branch of a tree and watch drip.

'Neither,' I say, and continue to jot:

'All self-knowledge, valour and resolve not flowing from intoxicants – are false.'

'I'll page David.' She reaches for a handset.

I settle into stride, spilling out of the *Reason(s) for Discharge* box, into *Mentor Comments*. 'The notion does not stand up,' I write, 'that those few stragglers in society who feel things more acutely, who succumb to the wealth of sensitivities that make them

human, traits and passions even celebrated by their peers –’

‘David West, David to reception.’

– should, for their failure to harmonise with mediocrity and automatism, be shut away with passive-aggressive profiteers who spend their hostilities passing off manipulation and dogma as some kind of curative therapy.’

‘David to reception, please.’

‘The need of this assortment of neo-Californian ano-extremists to patronise, wield authority and lord false compassion over others is a more breathtaking and sinister disturbance of character than anything I could aspire to. If one thing convinces me to stay out of rehab it is this shocking realisation: not that such a hoax could find allies – but that such allies as it finds should be so menacingly installed in one place.’

Dalí Girl twitches. She straightens pamphlets. ‘Goodness knows where David is. Shall we find you a seat in the Quiet Room? While we – sort things out?’

‘No,’ I say.

She blinks, nodding slowly. ‘The thing is – this isn’t your form that you’ve written on. Your form is in our files. So we’d have to write all this out again.’

I stand watching her for a moment. ‘Then why don’t we copy my few registration details from the form you have, onto this one?’

‘Well, no, but – this isn’t the form we have on file for you. You see? Really you’re not supposed to write on the form anyway.’

I level my gaze.

‘Also your form will have comments and –’

‘But no it won’t. I haven’t attended anything.’

‘Well, yes, but it still will, because – well, *that’s your form.*’

‘Then why don’t you fetch that form?’

‘I’m afraid it’s confidential.’

‘Hm.’ I shift my weight.

‘I’m sorry – it’s just that, for instance, any clinical notes will be there, and of course your payment details –’

‘Would you even charge for half a night’s stay?’

The girl stiffens. ‘Well the course is pre-paid. You see? The terms and conditions –’

‘No no – the term and condition in the existential world is that I arrived during the night, and now I’m leaving.’ I don’t say it unkindly. I even leave my mouth open, smiling. The tuft of my chin-beard bobs up like a squirrel.

Dalí Girl squirms.

Ah well, well. Even here we find profit picking over the bones of the fallen. I waft back a step. Dalí Girl shuffles papers while I try to accept the facts.* ‘I don’t know where David must be.’ She frowns down the passage.

‘Well, it’s an outrage.’ I calmly pocket the notepad and pen.

‘David West, urgently to reception please.’

My stare passes over a potted palm beside the desk, then over some letters at the back that spell ‘Hope’. I muse how much better a word like ‘Smashing’ would look. Or even a sign from a Chinese supermarket, ‘Excellent Soiling’ or ‘Hymen News’.

‘The thing is’ – Dalí inflates with a new idea – ‘you’ll be wanting your personal effects? Your wallet, phone and what-have-you? I’ll need a senior staff member to sign them out, I can’t just do it. That’s the thing.’

‘Look – in the space of three minutes your reasons for being unhelpful have been: that I’ll have to write on a different form; that I’m not allowed to write on any form; that I’m not allowed to see the form; and that you need professionals to open a locker.’

‘That’s the thing,’ she says, happy to just leave the topic. ‘I can get you some spring water? While we wait for David?’

* Ah, Customer Service. It falls to Dalí Girl to work the gulf between a photograph of a glamour model in a telephone headset and a collections department not based at this address. She squirms because despite efforts to erase her common sense, culture has left a nodule of reason intact. That fragment of tumour makes her uncomfortable enforcing outrageous terms. Her employer should have picked up on this.

That's the Thing. I see in her face the power to call people who come more quickly than David, and with medications. Whoosh. I just take the water, frankly, whose fizz crackles noisily around a slice of lemon, and mope down the passage to the Quiet Room. This is a vacuum of spirit overlooking the manor's grounds. Just where you'd expect to Wait for David. It smells of paint and damp. I find it empty, and sit on a pus-coloured sofa facing a window through which trees thrash their bristles in the wind, a pummeling wind choked with dead leaves.

I should've just walked out. Reception was a mistake.

A chessboard sits on a side table with some magazines on relaxation and breathing. Light from a table lamp glares off their covers. The organism who needs tips on breathing, I muse, should probably be allowed to die. And I wonder if light would bounce as well off a copy of *Bacon Busters* or *Fisting Wives*. We'll never find out; that's why these rural rehabs cause unease. Because a once-voluptuous mansion where waltzes were danced, where the air churned with fragrance and with the barks of beloved children and dogs, now a monument to shame, condescension and beansprouts – will have either a copy of *Fisting Wives* or a brace of corpses under the kitchen garden.

It won't have both.

I switch off the lamp and soak in a violet glow. The chessboard sits waiting for a game, I inspect the rows of pieces. Pawns line up to die, knights ponder dog-legs, rooks measure straits. With one imperious swipe I take the white queen and plough through both camps, batting the black king to the floor. This is the sort of attitude we'll need this evening. Whichever odyssey we've embarked on – and I feel it is an odyssey, if only a brief one – ought to show the same disregard for life and nature which they have shown for us. We'll seek pleasure without restraint.

Go out as animals. As capitalists!

Ah, this moment before death is a virgin arena. Not that I'm the first to discover suicide, even you must've cradled the idea, lifted

its flap in a certain dark moment, sniffed it, sized it up. Not to say you've planned it like me; but still you must sense, in the combinations of chance already in play around you, at least one outcome whose price is your death.* I wonder if it's where we get a sense of being lucky, watching destiny's fingers whirr past our triggers, watching other people's triggers being hit. Surely this alone makes news so profitable.

Anyway – mine were hit.

My mind drifts to Nelson Smuts. What a debauch we'll have. What a bacchanal. Last I knew he was just back from Brussels, in a private kitchen down south. A while ago this was. A year ago, perhaps. Ah, Smuts.

In the course of this reflection, the Quiet Room door opens. A slim young man looks in. He wears a skinny jumper and has a pale, unformed sort of face, like the foetus of a horse. He just stands looking.

Then after a while he points at my shoes:

'That's leather,' he says.

Not sure where he's going with this, I look back for a moment, and after he offers no more clues, raise a finger at his top and say: 'That's wool.'

'Yes, but the lamb survived,' he says.

I turn away, blinking.

After more silence he says: 'Aren't you coming?'

'No,' I say.

Another few moments pass. Then he goes out and shuts the

* About suicide: imagine the spirit as a mansion. You'll guess we don't use many rooms. Apart from a few moments in childhood we don't dance around it in sunlight. But there's a traffic of things in and out, and what happens is that unwanted bulks can gather inside. Gather and gather, menacing us. Unable to shift them, we hide in ever-smaller spaces. And in our last hole, life offers a choice: to play out our demise in parallel theatres – psychosis, zealotry, religion, cancer, addiction – or to bow quietly out. But beware: life doesn't ask these high questions when we're confident and fresh – it waits for hopelessness.

door behind him. Other murmurs pass in the hall, and as they fade, a set of footsteps approaches.

‘Gabriel Brockwell?’ a man calls at the door. He calls without effort, in a tone that won’t leave him looking stupid if no answer comes.

I ignore him. I’ll wait here till all’s quiet, then run. I sense him looking stupid behind the door, but feel no stress in ignoring him, or any care at all. Those tensions are gone now, because I could kill myself at any moment.

‘Gabriel?’

As he says my name, I write it on the notebook.

A title appears: *The Book of Gabriel*.

Then a subtitle: *Anything – for Monkeys, Dogs & Poets*.

I put *Anything* rather than *Everything* because it seems all things arise in the same way.* In order to support a mass of pseudo-industries, markets have led us to believe that every fragment of life is highly specialised, and thus in need of goods and services to control it; whereas in fact all nature has a predictable and quite boring character, whether you’re a beetle or a radiographer, escaping a bird or imaging a breast. As for the creatures in the title, I feel they’re ambassadors of human spirit, motifs from where charm and self-loathing are born. They might even have their own heaven – why not? – if Swedenborg says there’s a special paradise for Turks and the Dutch.

With the notebook officially open a spirit of research prevails in limbo. Also a valuable facade, worthy of a businessperson or even a government; suddenly our mission isn’t wanton but scientific, a bold and selfless initiative towards the expansion of human understanding. Our notes should therefore be clear, and you’ll forgive me if the language seems formal – surely to throw light on a decadence we must step away from its lingo, bent as this has been

* Remember Hobart Loots said: *Lots of things are included in everything; but there’s only one anything.*

to sanction outrage. Because isn't language the buttress of civilisation? Honed to explain quirks and crimes in all subtlety, without margin for error or escape?*

With this decisive stroke I stand off the sofa. My belongings can stay at reception, Smuts will have money, Smuts will have food and fine wine.

But as I reach the door, new shuffling sounds approach.

A man's head pokes into the Quiet Room:

'Ah – there you are,' he says.

* To take hold, a decadence relies on communal thoughtlessness, and this is first brought about by language. Through language the acts and notions which a few years ago would have caused outrage come to be accepted. Ever more careless words introduce attitudes into the culture which make reason unfashionable. Vocabulary shrinks, forcing more concepts to live behind fewer expressions; and in this process the acceptable and unacceptable come to mix, and are passed off one for the other. Wherever underminers are at work, in government or commerce, we find this device. Words are a focusing tool, and decadence relies on blurring to succeed. I hope this makes sense. Anyway, whatever. Get over it. LOL ☺.