

MOLD-ON-WOLD LITERARY FESTIVAL

In partnership with *The Sentinel*

Saturday 19th July

3 p.m. Big Tent. £10

DAN DICKSON

The iconic author of *Dispatches from the E Zone* and *The Curious and the Damned* reads from his new novel *Otherworld* and discusses the challenge of creating a convincing futuristic dystopia.

Sunday 20th July

3 p.m. Big Tent. £10

The Sentinel Keynote Talk

BRYCE PEABODY

CELEBRITY AND HYPOCRISY

The legendary literary critic launches *The Poisoned Pen*, a new collection of his dazzling reviews. He reflects on our obsession with celebrity and considers how ill-founded these public myths often are.

3 p.m. School Room. £10

VIRGINIA WESTCOTT

The author of *Entente Cordiale*, *A Fine Imagined Thing* and *The Useless Boyfriends Club* reads from her latest novel, *Sickle Moon Rises*, and discusses the role of romance in contemporary fiction.

3 p.m. Small Tent. £10

FRANCIS MEADOWES

THE AMATEUR SLEUTH

The creator of the acclaimed George

Braithwaite series of crime novels considers the history of the amateur detective in crime fiction, from early beginnings in *The Thousand and One Nights* to TV's Jonathan Creek and Jackson Brodie.

Monday 21st July

2 p.m. Big Tent. £10

FAMILY MAN

Everyone's favourite countryman and smallholder, Jonty Smallbone, talks frankly about the ups and downs of life on Peewit Farm, the joys and challenges of bringing up three kids in a rural setting, and the problems he faced as he researched and wrote his latest book, *Wild Stuff*.

6 p.m. Middle Tent. £10

TO HELMAND AND BACK

Ex-Royal Marines officer Marvin Blake discusses the experiences that lie behind his extraordinary memoir of a life in combat, culminating in his being seriously wounded in a firefight with the Taliban in Afghanistan. He is joined by ghostwriter Anna Copeland, in an unusually frank discussion of how his real-life adventures were brought to the page.

ONE

Saturday 19th July

In the bathroom of Room 29, Bryce Peabody leant in close to the mirror above the sink. Through steamed-up glasses, he was working on the hairs in his nose and ears with the electric wand that his new girlfriend Priya Kaur had bought him for his birthday. It had been a shocking moment when he'd realized that he could no longer see to trim his nasal hair without his specs – if that wasn't a definition of middle age, what was? But Priya, rather than pronounce him 'past it', as his ex Scarlett would have done, had gone onto the Net and found him this wonderful tool, which buzzed and whizzed around his nostrils and lobes and rendered him in a minute as clean-cut (almost!) as some far more appropriate squeeze of her own age.

There was a light double knock at the door of the main room.

'I'll get it!' Priya called.

As a man who had passed the grim milestone of fifty, you came in for a lot of flak for dating a woman in her twenties. But it wasn't all about physical attractiveness, as people endlessly implied. Part of it was the sheer energy and freshness of outlook.

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Could he imagine Scarlett – or Anna even – leaping out of bed to meet room service?

There was a loud crash from next door.

‘Oh no, sorry. Now I must clear . . .’

Glancing through, Bryce saw that the skinny, dark-haired waitress who had brought in the breakfast tray had spilt the coffee.

‘It’s OK, love, we can mop it up.’

Bryce smiled as he heard Priya’s forgiving laughter mixed with apologetic Eastern European murmurs. Compare and contrast what Scarlett would have done to the poor creature. Minced her.

There were several reasons why Bryce had decided to eat in this morning. For one, this was a very nice room. The festival had done him proud, getting him, he reckoned, the best in the hotel – and where did you stay for Mold if not at the White Hart? Room 29 had its own staircase, a four-poster bed, and a view down the sloping garden to the woodland at the bottom; beyond that, the river glinted through the trees. For two, he loved the rare ritual of breakfast in bed, the decadence of munching bacon and sausage while lying back on soft pillows, the newspaper sections spread out before you. For three, when those pages contained a coruscating – and, one hoped, a defining – attack on one of the country’s most irritating writers, it was fun to be able to savour one’s prose in private. Having done so, to toss it across to one’s youthful paramour with a casual, ‘This might amuse you.’

Of course it would amuse her! Bryce was under no illusions about that. Nor, really, about what Priya saw in him. He was the literary world’s number one hatchet man, the guy to whom all the others looked to set the agenda. Bryce knew full well the impact

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his attack on Dan Dickson would have. When he emerged later, into the festival crowds, he would be the centre of attention. Mold wasn't a pop concert, so no one would mob him. But they would all notice him, and mutter about him, all those earnest nobodies who bought the *Sentinel* on a daily basis, who lapped up its liberal, left-leaning views like mother's milk. He was their naughty chancer, the guy that showed you didn't have to be dull to be right-on. Tomorrow afternoon they would throng to the Big Tent, longing for more. And boy were they going to get it. Bryce couldn't help but chuckle at the thought of that great big stick of dynamite lying at the bottom of his briefcase. *Celebrity and Hypocrisy*. Bring it on!

As Bryce strolled back in from the en suite, Priya was carrying the trays across from the table.

'That scatty cow split half the coffee,' she said, in the Midlands accent that Bryce still found strangely sexy. 'But it's OK, there's enough left for both of us.' Priya nodded at the *Sentinel*, which had mercifully escaped the mess. 'You got anything in this morning, love?'

'A little bombshell, though I say it myself.'

'Let me see.'

'Shall we eat our brekky first? It would be a shame to let it go cold.'

They climbed between the sheets together, lifted up the steel plate covers and got stuck in.

'Well, well,' said Bryce, examining the spread. 'White pudding. You don't often see that outside the Gaelic fringe.'

'It looks disgusting.'

'Taste it. If you don't like it, I'll have it.'

She did so. 'Yuk,' she said, making an exaggerated grimace.

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Bryce laughed. 'Famous Scottish delicacy. Oatmeal and pork fat.'

'Should you really be eating that, Bryce? It must be a hundred per cent bad for you.'

'Too late,' he grinned, popping the gleaming slice into his mouth with the expression of a naughty child.

'You silly man! This breakfast really is a heart attack on a plate. Why couldn't you have had the Loch Fyne haddock?'

'I expect I'll live a few more years yet. Whatever I choose to eat.' Bryce forked up a rasher of bacon and chewed it thoughtfully. 'For such a deeply rural bit of England,' he said, 'this is an exceedingly good hotel.'

'Didn't you stay here before? Oh no, I suppose you didn't.'

The subject was closed before it was even opened. For festivals gone by, Bryce had of course stayed at the cottage. This year, for the first time, Scarlett was out there with the twins on her own; this year there would be no sneaky texts from Anna, popping up at awkward times on his mobile, requiring an answer, or at least the practised lie that he was 'out of range'. At one level, he was sad, about the awful mess he had left behind; at another he felt so much better. This was the place he was in now, this was the future. Who was to say that he and Priya wouldn't be at the cottage themselves next year?

Tray pushed aside, Bryce sank back on the pillow, savouring the last irresistible flakes of his *pain au chocolat* and keeping a weather eye on his undeniably gorgeous girlfriend as she read his piece. Anna and Scarlett, Anna and Scarlett, he mused, as those penetrating blue eyes of his roamed from the floral-patterned satin curtains of the four-poster and out round the

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room. How had he let it all go on for so long? He didn't feel so bad about Scarlett, they had been falling apart for years, it was a relief to have finally achieved closure. But abandoning Anna so abruptly had been cruel; especially as she was now forty-three and had been banging on forever about wanting a baby.

'Very mean and very funny,' said Priya, tossing down the Review section and snuggling in to his side. 'Just like you, my love.'

'You didn't laugh much.'

'More smileworthy than laughworthy.'

'Silly tosser's had it coming.'

'Let's hope he doesn't turn up at your talk and make a scene.'

Bryce chuckled. 'All the better if he does. Anyway, this is just the starter. By the time the punters leave the Big Tent tomorrow, they'll have forgotten all about the preposterous Dickson.'

'Really? Who's next?'

'Never you mind.'

'Oh go on, tell me . . .'

'Got to promote my bloody book somehow.'

Priya reached out to the bedside table and opened the festival programme. '3 pm, Sunday 24th July, Big Tent,' she read out loud. 'Bryce Peabody. CELEBRITY AND HYPOCRISY. *The legendary literary critic launches The Poisoned Pen, a new collection of his dazzling reviews. He reflects on our obsession with celebrity and considers how ill-founded these public myths often are.*

'Give us a clue, Brycey,' she said, loosening her dressing gown as she stroked the grey stubble on his chin with those always-arousing fingers of hers. 'I'm assuming a huge star.'

'Are you now?' he gasped, rolling in to her. 'Make it worth my while and maybe I'll tell you.'

TWO

Five miles out of town, at Wyveridge Hall, they rose later, having been up, some of them, till the sky had started to lighten and high above the silhouetted battlements the clouds were tinged with pink. The old mansion had about fifteen usable bedrooms and these were crammed with festivalgoers; in some, the youngest members of the house party, those fresh out of uni, lay ten to a floor in sleeping bags, all paying forty quid a night for the privilege. But Ranjit Richardson, their dreadlocked host, was an astute Master of Ceremonies. He liked to have a few luminaries around too, to spice things up and give his satellite scene some glamour. And they, the younger crowd joked accurately, got special treatment. If you were published, you would, for the same price, be in a room with just one other. If you were famous, you'd have private quarters.

Unusually, Ranjit was one of the first down to the kitchen this morning. It was a wonderful old room that had surely changed little since the days when the Delancey family had been waited on by a butler and a team of servants. An ancient range took up the best part of one wall. Under the mullioned window were three big stainless steel sinks. Huge saucepans, encrusted with years of black grease, hung from the ceiling. Off to one

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side was a pantry, with shelves of slate and a musty smell of old vegetables.

‘See what your rival’s come up with,’ Ranjit said, yawning as he passed the *Sentinel* Review section across to the travel writer Conal O’Hare, who sat the other side of the big, wooden-topped kitchen table, eating a bacon sandwich of his own design – four slices of well-crisped bacon, a slew of grainy French mustard, two hunks of wholemeal brown bread.

‘He’s not my feckin’ rival,’ Conal replied, tugging with his spare hand at one of the dark curls that straggled down below his left ear. None the less he took the paper. Still munching on his sarnie, he speed-read Bryce’s review.

‘Such a twat,’ he said when he’d finished. ‘Dan Dickson’s not that bad. And what has Bryce-effing-Peabody ever written that’s worth reading?’

‘A lot of brilliant reviews,’ said Ranjit. ‘One has to say.’

‘Does one? “Have to say”?’ Conal put on the exaggerated posh English accent that he’d been using to tease his friend since the day they had first met, at Trinity College, Dublin, a decade and a half before. ‘And what else?’ he continued, back in his well-maintained brogue. ‘Nothing. Except a crappy little biog of some barely remembered critic of the last century.’

‘Is that fair? Did you actually read the Leavis book?’

‘I did, as it happens. I went to the launch party. You forget, we used to be friends before the bastard betrayed me. Insofar as that tosser has any real friends.’

‘Don’t get obsessed, mate. What happened wasn’t entirely his fault.’

‘That’s not what I heard,’ Conal replied. ‘Dinners, flowers,

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presents. When he knew she was involved with me. I mean, that's the thing that gets me.'

'All's fair in love and war. You'd have done the same.'

'No, I wouldn't.'

'Don't be ridiculous,' said Ranjit. 'Of course you would.'

'He's twenty years older than her. Why can't he pick on someone his own age?'

'He's at the top of his game, he can have who he wants.'

'He already has a wife. And a girlfriend. It's just gross.'

'He doesn't have a wife, actually. Bryce and Scarlett were never married.'

'Whatever. They've got kids. That's as good as married.'

'Not in the eyes of the law.'

'Screw the eyes of the law. As far as I'm concerned he's a professional c-u-next-Tuesday, and if I could cause him serious harm I would.'

Ranjit laughed. 'Oh yes, whatever happened to your "public revenge"?''

Conal let out a bitter chuckle. This was an idea that had been cooked up one drunken evening at the Frontline Club in Paddington, just after he'd returned from his long research trip to Somalia and was still in the stunned mullet stage of rejection. A tableful of friends had offered him suggestions as to what he should do to Bryce to make his point. Pouring a glass of wine on his head at a launch party was one option, but somewhat clichéd; in any case, Scarlett had already done that. 'Kick him really hard on the shin,' someone had suggested, 'that'll hurt like buggery but it won't do him any damage.' 'But I want to do him damage!' Conal had cried. 'Seriously, I'd like to strangle the bastard.'

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‘It’s still pending,’ he said now. ‘Maybe I’ll break his nose at one of the festival parties.’

‘D’you know what, mate? Leave it. The very best form of revenge is to be happy with someone new. Cruise past the pair of them with some cutie-pie on your arm—’

‘In fairness,’ Conal cut in, ‘it’s as much to do with me as anything else. It was hard core in Africa and I was eejit enough to keep Priya in my head like some feckin’ talisman. Something certain in an evil world. And then to come back and find . . .’

‘Yes, well, these things happen,’ Ranjit replied with a yawn. ‘There are plenty more fish in the sea. What d’you make of the Grace/Fleur combo?’

‘Lovely.’

On Ranjit’s suggestion, Conal had given these two young women a lift from London the day before. By the time they had arrived in the long and beautiful valley that led down to Mold, the three of them had been laughing together like old friends. This was typical of Ranjit. He was forever trying to stir things up, get things going.

‘More than just lovely,’ Ranjit replied. ‘Has Fleur shown you any of her films?’

‘We talked about them. And Grace’s “novel-in-progress”.’ He made the quotes with his fingers.

‘Don’t be so patronizing, you arsehole. The films are excellent. Quirky and funny.’

Conal shrugged. ‘Grace has a boyfriend.’

‘Who’s in New York and on the way out, by all accounts.’

‘So I’m supposed to do to him what Bryce did to me?’

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‘For Christ’s sake, Conal! Grow up. If you like her, go for it. You may find you’ve got competition.’

‘You?’

‘Certainly not. I’m cool with Carly. No, strictly *entre nous* Rory McCarthy has the hots for her.’

‘Does he now? That’s OK, because strictly *entre nous* I prefer Fleur.’

‘What are you waiting for? Tasty as a very tasty thing and currently single. I can’t guarantee she’ll remain so all weekend.’

But Conal’s eyes remained moodily on the floor. ‘I still love Priya. That’s the trouble. Can’t get the stupid creature out of my system.’

THREE

By a quarter to three that afternoon the Big Tent was buzzing. On the screen above the stage was a huge black and white photo of Dan Dickson in trademark pose. Facing sideways, but looking straight out at the audience, the ageing *enfant terrible* of English letters almost personified the word sardonic. A sneer curled on his lips; above that proud Roman nose, his dark eyes met yours with disdain. But there was insecurity there too. *You are all scum*, his look seemed to say, *and yet, somewhere deep inside, I'm a teensy bit scared of you*. The forehead was as long as one would expect from such an intellect; above it, the receding hair was cropped to a no. 2 – a good strategy, as otherwise he would have been in line for a disastrous comb-over. Below his short neck came surprisingly muscled shoulders, shown off to effect in a skin-tight black T-shirt; he looked more like a scaffolder or a squaddie than most people's idea of an author. Over this portrait, in a chunky crimson typeface, was superimposed the single word:

dickson

Paradoxically, Bryce's attack on him in the *Sentinel* had made Dan's talk a sellout. The punters wanted to know how he'd react

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– if he reacted at all. And then of course there was the tantalizing question: would Bryce himself appear?

He did. Fantastic! At two minutes to three, up the creaking steps at the back of the marquee to take his place with Priya at the end of a row. The noise in the tent doubled. Heads turned to observe the famous critic, and then, embarrassed to be so naff, turned hurriedly back. ‘That’s him all right,’ they said. ‘The short guy in the pink jacket’ . . . ‘Next to the pretty Asian girl’ . . . ‘That’s his latest’ . . . ‘Can’t stop himself, it’s like a reflex’ . . . ‘She was his PA, apparently’.

Five rows from the front, Conal felt sick at the sight of his ex with her new man. Priya was wearing a tight purple top that set off her deep brown skin perfectly. The last time they’d spoken he had been on his knees in front of her, begging her to rethink. She had looked down at him with an indifference that had seemed heartless, but surely on reflection masked more turbulent feelings within. Now, watching her chatting with Bryce, he felt a rush of hope. She was showing her teeth in that familiar nervy laugh, but it was hardly, he decided, the look of love. With that he felt calm again. Maybe there was room for a few Ranjit-style tactics after all. Just in case Priya might notice him, he leaned forward and engaged Fleur on his other side – launching into a loud and visibly entertaining riff on the subject of the ‘dickson’ image.

Priya hadn’t, in fact, seen Conal. But Bryce had spotted Anna’s dark bob, ten rows in front of him at the bottom of the raised section of seating. Beside her sat a brawny-looking black guy with a missing arm. This was presumably Marvin the Marine, wounded in action, whose book about operations in Afghanistan and Iraq Anna had been ghosting and was up at the festival to

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help publicise; the gossip was that they were now an item. Seeing him with her, Bryce was surprised at how little jealousy he felt. Good on you, girl, he thought, for not sitting around moping about the might-have-beens; and double good on you for not dating someone from your social comfort zone. In a funny kind of way her choice reflected well on him too. He was the kind of guy that Anna Copeland dated: cool, contemporary, possibly a bit dangerous.

Bryce ran his eyes on over the crowd, looking out for his other ex, Scarlett. He couldn't see her anywhere. Perhaps she'd decided to stay in London after all. Absolutely bloody typical. Make a huge fuss about having sole access to the cottage, 'the twins' first week of holiday', etc., etc. Then not turn up at all.

The crowd hushed. Out from the wings came Dan in person, dwarfed by his photo. Behind him, auburn hair flowing loose, gleeful in a cream and blue dirndl skirt, was Laetitia Humble, the director of the festival. Bryce had known her since the earliest days of Mold, when the whole shebang had been run by her dad Henry. At that point Laetitia had still been trying to make it as an actor, settling for ever dimmer parts in ever grimmer fringe shows. Bryce remembered one particularly dire performance Scarlett had dragged him along to at the Man in the Moon pub theatre in Chelsea: Laetitia as Titania in a five-woman *Midsummer Night's Dream* with an 'alien theme'. But she'd seen sense eventually. She wasn't Kate Winslet, and once over thirty the statistics were against her. As Henry Humble became increasingly frail she promoted herself from assistant to organizer. Since his death she had made the festival her full-time job. She had moved to the area, shackled up with the drummer of a once

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famous punk band, and was now indisputably the Queen of Mold.

‘Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen,’ she shouted over the gathering hush. ‘We are very privileged to have with us in the Big Tent today one of the country’s leading writers . . .’

And off she went, overdoing it as usual. Absurd and ghastly though she was in many ways, you couldn’t help but admire her PR skills. Finally Dan was allowed to approach the microphone and greet his fans. Four minutes into a reading from his new novel *Otherworld* Bryce squeezed Priya’s arm.

‘Can you stand it?’ he whispered loudly.

‘Oh Bryce! It’s interesting.’

‘Is it?’

‘Since we’ve come, we might as well stay.’

So he sat, patiently, through the sesquipedalian prose, wondering why people liked this kind of wilful obscurity. Because it made them feel clever? Because it made them feel stupid? Probably a bit of both. If even he were stumped for some of these definitions, what chance the rest of these dutifully nodding heads?

At the end of the reading there was the usual applause, totally over the top for the passage ‘dickson’ had treated them to. Now he moved on to discourse on why he’d wanted to create his futuristic dystopia and the issues he hoped he might be tackling. Climate change, yawn. Overpopulation, double yawn. The fight for dwindling resources, treble yawn. The man was as modish as he was unoriginal.

Finally it was time for questions. ‘I always enjoy interaction with my readers,’ Dan said, ‘so I’ve left a good twenty minutes for us to chat.’ With some fumbling, and accompanying laughter

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from the tent, he replaced the mic on its stand. Then he sat down on his chair and leant forward in a matey way. 'There is,' he went on, 'at one level, something rather hideous about these festivals.' Across the stage, perched on her chair, the director tittered a bit too loudly. 'Sorry Laetitia, nothing personal. What I mean by that is this making of writers into public figures, into stars, if you like, when what writers should really do is to keep things as normal as possible, to insinuate themselves seamlessly into the warp and weft of ordinary life . . .'

'Pretentious arsehole,' muttered Bryce. 'If he really wants to insinuate himself into the warp and weft of life, what's he doing at an event like this?'

Beside him Priya giggled.

'As those who've heard me talk before know,' Dan was saying, 'there are three questions I don't allow at festivals.'

'Time to go?' said Bryce.

'Bryce! Come on. We're here now.'

In the row in front of them a woman with a face that looked as if it had been scrubbed pink by a Brillo pad turned round and glared. 'Shsh!' she hissed, eyes like gobstoppers through her thick specs.

'Question one,' said Dickson. "'Where do you get your ideas?'" From my frigging head, of course. That's why I'm a writer.'

'God, he's smug,' said Bryce.

'Question two: "What is your routine?" Answer: My routine is irrelevant. And let me tell you a secret. Even if you followed my routine to the minute, you wouldn't be me. So make up your own routine. Whatever works for you.'

'So arrogant too. Under that man of the people pose.'

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‘Sssh!’ The Brillo pad woman glared again; Bryce was amused that she was taking notes. He couldn’t see whether she’d written down ‘from my frigging head, of course’.

‘Question three: “Do you use a pen or a word processor?”
Answer: Never you mind. Sometimes I even use a pencil.’

From the back of the tent came the sound of some female who seemed to be approaching orgasm as she laughed, so thrilled was she at every word that dropped from Dan’s lips.

‘OK,’ Dan continued, ‘with those strictures in mind, let’s begin. The first question, please.’

Four hands shot up. ‘Girl, young woman I should say, five rows in. With the short blonde hair.’

‘Whoops,’ muttered Bryce with a chuckle. ‘Not quite as PC as you’d like to be, eh, Dan?’

‘I’d like to ask a question about reviews,’ asked the blonde. ‘Do you read them? And if you do, and you get a really awful one, how does that feel?’

There was a collective intake of breath across the tent. In the magnified image on the screen, Bryce could see the cogs of Dan’s mind whirring, wondering how to play this.

‘I imagine you’re talking about the pasting I got in the *Sentinel* this morning,’ he said.

‘Well, yes. I suppose I am.’

‘Here we go,’ said Bryce. He was aware of heads turning.

‘You know,’ said Dan, ‘there are always two quotes I remember when it comes to reviews. The first is Somerset Maugham’s. “Don’t read your reviews, dear boy, measure them.” The second is Evelyn Waugh’s. “You may let a bad review spoil your breakfast, but don’t let it spoil your lunch.”’

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‘Ya-a-awn,’ said Bryce. ‘Such old hat.’ But he was drowned out by the laughter that rang through the tent.

‘So no, you’ll be glad to hear that I ate a hearty ploughman’s for lunch today. And also, when I receive a pointless stinker like that, I always think: at least I’m trying. While what is *he* doing?’

There was sporadic clapping; presumably, Bryce thought, from all the sad wannabe creatives in the place.

‘You wonder what motivates these people,’ Dan went on. ‘Professional critics.’ He spat out the word. ‘Is it because they have little or no talent themselves that they need to keep savaging the efforts of others? The funny thing about reviewers, if you get to know them, is that they know exactly how hard a road it is writing fiction. D’you know why? Because most of them have had a crack at it themselves. And failed.’

On the screen, Bryce could see Dan pause, wondering whether to hammer home this tired point. He knew him well enough to know that he would. He remembered the first time he’d met him, at a squat in Belsize Park, way back in 1983. Dickson, just down from Oxford, lying on the floor cradling a bottle of Bulgarian red, a huge Camberwell carrot of a spliff in his mouth, sounding off about the newly published list of Twenty Young British Novelists. ‘What the frig is Adam Mars-Jones doing there? He’s not even a novelist. Three short stories, that’s all he’s done.’ No, Dickson could be as vicious as any of his critics when it suited him.

‘I happen to know,’ Dan went on, looking straight at Bryce, ‘that the *Sentinel*’s reviewer wrote a couple of truly shocking novels a couple of decades ago which never even saw the light of day.’

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This was a bit below the belt. Bryce hadn't published his early fiction; to his knowledge, Dan had never seen it. As the heads of the audience turned towards him, Priya squeezed his arm and looked supportively up at him.

'So who do you like, Bryce?' Dan taunted, in the grating, cynical tone that was his trademark. 'I sometimes get the feeling, reading your reviews—'

Bryce had had enough. 'So you *do* read them?' he yelled back across the crowd.

'Wait, please, Bryce,' came Laetitia's voice. 'We can't quite hear you up here. Just let Holly get to you with the roving mic. For any of you who don't know, this is Bryce Peabody, ladies and gentlemen, literary editor of the *Sentinel*.'

The work-experience was now at Bryce's side, holding out the bulbous microphone. 'I said,' he said softly, taking it, enjoying the sudden power of his amplified voice, "'So you *do* read them?'" Your reviews. From the quotes you just gave us, Dan, I imagined you'd be out there with your ruler.'

'Oh yeah,' said Dickson, 'I read them all right. And some of them aren't bad, for what they are.'

'Very gracious.'

'I wasn't talking about yours. D'you know what your problem is, Bryce? You don't inhabit the modern world. From the endless historical comparisons you make, I get the feeling that, deep down, you don't like anything written after about 1950. Correct that, 1850. You're always banging on about Tolstoy and Conrad and Proust. I mean, who do you like from now?'

'Tolstoy died in 1910, Conrad in, I think, 1924. The last volume of *À La Recherche* wasn't even published until 1927 . . .'

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‘My point exactly.’

‘What’s sixty years between friends? But they were *better*, don’t you think? Than most of the stuff we’re forced to read now.’

‘No one’s forcing you to read anything, Bryce.’

‘Oh, but they are.’

‘OK then, Bryce, tell us. Who do you like from this century? That we happen to live in? The twenty-first. As opposed to the nineteenth.’

‘Anybody who reads my column knows that I regularly applaud contemporary authors,’ Bryce fired back. ‘But yes, I’m not ashamed to say I like writers who give me a story, who present me with characters I can at least half-recognize from this twenty-first century that you treasure so much, a few real-life human dilemmas I can start to try and empathize with . . .’

Dan was laughing, but you could feel the anger vibrating in his voice. ‘So what precisely do you know about real-life dilemmas then, Bryce? What do you actually see of the world outside the *Sentinel* offices and your cosy little launch party circuit?’

‘Let’s make this *ad hominem*, shall we?’

‘La di dah, bring on the Latin tags, mate. Seriously, what *do* you know about what it’s like to be . . . I don’t know . . . a farmer in Mold or . . . a . . . a dustman in Warrington.’

Bryce’s amplified gurgles of amusement rang through the hall. ‘A bit more than you, apparently,’ he replied. ‘I think the word “dustman” went out about twenty years ago. The refuse in Warrington is probably collected by women these days. Romanian women most likely. If someone wrote me a good story about a feisty female garbage disposal operative from Bucharest I would be the first to give it the thumbs up. I’m longing to be transported

MARK McCrum

from the parochial world I live in, to feel the impact of something powerful from elsewhere. Just so long as it's convincing. Unpretentious. Dare I suggest *well-written*.

'Look Dan, nobody likes criticism. But that doesn't mean that it isn't valid for a critic to express his opinion. He must be honest to what he feels, otherwise what is the point? Can you imagine a world in which writers received non-stop adulation? Their egotistic bonces would be even more like watermelons than they are already. Sometimes, if someone produces a piece of shit, it has to be said. It *is* said, by most of the people reading it. You just don't hear those conversations in kitchens at parties, see those paperbacks being hurled across bedrooms. Someone has to have the courage to express these feelings publicly. To help the ordinary reader discriminate in the face of the tidal wave of manure that appears every week in print. To say nothing of the tsunami of e-crap out there. And that's my job. For which I get paid, I might add, a lot less than Dan Dickson. As for my own attempts at fiction, which were, by my own choice, never published, I long ago accepted I didn't have that particular talent.' Bryce paused for a second, to give heft to his final punch. 'Unlike some people I was sensible enough to admit it.'

Shocked laughter rang through the tent.

'Are you saying I have no talent for fiction?'

'Everything's relative, Dan. You're not Tolstoy, I think that's pretty clear.'

'Here we go again. Ranking everyone, marking them out of ten, like some bloody schoolmaster. Creativity doesn't work like that, bro. Tolstoy was writing in a different century, in a different country. It would be strange if I were frigging Tolstoy.'

THE FESTIVAL MURDERS

There was a momentary pause, during which Bryce could be heard scornfully repeating the word 'bro'. Then Laetitia, who had been rooted to her chair, a studied look of fascination on her face, seized her chance, rushing for Dan's microphone and pulling it from its stand. 'Thank you both,' she interrupted, 'for that absolutely brilliant little dialogue on the subject of creativity and criticism. It's at moments like this that I count myself truly privileged to be running this festival, to be able to bring together such mighty talents as we've heard battling it out today. Sadly, Dan Dickson's time is now up and we have to clear the tent for Alan Titchmarsh, our next wonderful speaker this afternoon. I should just point out before we go that many of us are looking forward to Bryce's talk tomorrow afternoon, in this very same tent, on the fascinating-sounding subject of "Celebrity and Hypocrisy", and there are still a few tickets left for that, so I'd hurry along to our lovely girls and boys in the box office if I were you. And now, if I might ask you all to join me in a hearty round of applause for Dan Dickson, for a really very enjoyable . . .'

Bryce leant in to Priya. 'Come on, let's make a dash for it, before I'm surrounded by effing gossip columnists.'