

WHITE SUMMER

LUKE BITMEAD

Legend  Press
Independent Book Publisher

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Contents © Luke Bitmead 2006

First edition published May 2006.
This edition published June 2008

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data available.

ISBN 978-1-9065580-2-4

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Set in Times
Printed by J. H. Haynes and Co. Ltd., Sparkford.

Cover designed by Gudrun Jobst
www.yellowoftheegg.co.uk

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FOR MY MOTHER...

OTHER WORKS BY LUKE BITMEAD:

**HEADING SOUTH BY LUKE BITMEAD
AND CATHERINE RICHARDS
PUBLISHED MAY 2007**

**VISIT LUKE BITMEAD'S WEBSITE:
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Chapter One

Okay, I thought. Okay. She's aiming for fashionably late. On a first date, girls do. It's accepted practice. Expected almost, like the spot on the side of your nose that arrives the day before, so large that it's in danger of closing the eye above it. I didn't have one of these. This made me nervous. Something else would go wrong then...

No... I shut this thought out. I pinned myself to the mental door marked ' upbeat ' and tried to pick the lock.

I lit another cigarette and glanced at my watch. It was only nine-twenty-three. She'd got held up that was all, or was re-touching her nails, changing her outfit, checking her bum in the mirror – doing things only girls do.

To get my nerve up, I drank. First dates... they're not easy, are they? They're like learning to swim. You dive in and get on with it, splash about for the first couple of minutes, then break into a tentative doggy-paddle. Months later you hope to be doing a fluent crawl, or better yet a gentle breaststroke. If not, you sink without trace.

I refused to go under this time. The booze was going to doggy-paddle me through.

The waitress clip-clopped over. She was cute, chubby and heavily made-up. She looked like she worked behind the counter at The Perfume Palace.

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“Do you want to order?” she said brightly. Her voice was clipped. She was destined for better than this. She could already have been dating a Coxwell Rogers, Peters-Farquhar or Slight Campbell. She was probably driving home in a Range Rover.

I asked for a pint.

“Your friend hasn’t showed up then.”

“Unless she’s hiding under another table,” I said, immediately regretting it. It was *so* hard to be funny when the nerves were jangling like sleigh-bells. It was taking all my concentration to make sure my voice didn’t warble.

The girl laughed, presumably out of politeness.

“She’d be silly to stand you up.”

“Why?” I was intrigued. This wasn’t the common consensus.

“It’s silly to stand anyone up. If you don’t want to go out with someone, you should just say no when they ask.”

I nodded without looking up. This was cold comfort. A frozen Hessian rug of it, brittle against my soft skin.

“I’m sure she’ll come,” she said, walking away. “She’s just making you wait. Doesn’t want to appear too keen.”

“Yeah. Don’t bet on it.”

She’d stood me up once already. This was the second time of asking. Her way of making it up to me.

So, a first date, second time of asking. Was this therefore a second date? Had all the romance gone with the first no-show? Perhaps for her, but for me the stubble-field fire of passion was raging all the stronger, almost out of control.

I lent back in my chair. Blimey, I thought (I’d recently given up the word ‘fuck’). Not content with blowing me out once, she was going for the double. And this time it was going to hurt twice as much, the inverse of the second stamp on the bollocks (which, if you’re a girl, by the way, doesn’t hurt nearly as much as the first).

I looked around the restaurant. Every table was full. Couples chatted and tasted each other’s food. Parents guided their dribbling children through the menus. Waitresses went about their

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work with bored efficiency. And then there was me, the figure depicted in popular fiction as the saddest of all social ‘groups’: the lone drinker.

Only one table caused concern. The one behind me. Take a quiet night out, invert and magnify, and this was it. Behind me were kids who your mother might call ‘trouble’. In short: a table of rugger lads.

I was doing my best to appear invisible but they were bound to spot me.

“Hey mate,” a voice sounded over my shoulder.

I lit a cigarette from the one I’d only half-smoked. I kept my cool. The light was dim but I wished it was dimmer.

“Hey mate.” The voice was deep, confident, no stranger to calling line outs and scrum tactics.

Reluctantly, I turned.

“How good looking is she?” said the voice. The face it came from was broad with a heavy chin and blue eyes.

I drew on my cigarette, acting casual.

“She’s better looking than you.”

The table rippled with laughter. Seven or eight throaty, super-masculine guffaws.

“Wouldn’t be difficult. What’s her name? Maybe we know her.”

I pulled on my cigarette.

“Come on. You can tell us her name.”

“Why do you want to know?”

“I told you. Maybe I know her.”

“He’s shagged most of the talent round here,” said a fat, drunk friend. The flesh of his neck hung over the collar of his rugby shirt like a series of miniature beer bellies hanging over jeans. The table laughed again. “He might be able to give you some advice.”

“Oh cool,” I said, sitting back. “Has he ever given you any? I mean, has he? Given you advice on chicks?” (I wasn’t sure if this is what rugger lads called girls these days, but no one raised

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an eyebrow.) “Have you got lucky this year? This decade? This century?”

“Yeah, you drunk virgin,” said a voice from the end of the table, appropriately Northern accented. “Poof!”

The following happened in slo-mo: the fat one, lunging forward to grab the guy’s throat, missed and cartwheeled his pint. It bucked and sprayed like a kicked cat. The friend sitting opposite gaped at the advancing tidal wave for a second before scooting back on his chair, torpedoing into me. I went down (like many a political career) without dignity.

As I writhed and wept on the beer-wet wood, all I could hear was laughter and swearing. I grabbed my chair with unsteady hands and clenched my teeth. Pulling myself up, I came face to face with her. The girl of my dreams.

“Hi, Guy,” she said, with an amused smile. “Don’t get up.”

The sport monkeys roared as one.

“Hi,” I croaked, slumping back. “Pleased you could make it, finally...”

“Ben,” I’d said, some months previously. “Ben. I’m not joking. I’ve met the girl of my dreams.”

Ben shrugged nonchalantly, something he often does in my company. I don’t know if he does it in the company of others, but with me he does it plenty.

“Again?”

“Forget the others. This is it. This is... the one.”

He put his head down and laughed into his pint. His double chin had turned into a tripler that year. Too many burgers. Too much take-out. He says he goes to the gym. He probably does and lies on the mats for an hour-long snooze, rousing only to view an attractive newcomer, her gym kit as yet unstained by sweaty workouts.

“I know I’ve said it before. But I was younger then. It was all

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about libido.”

“And now?” he said, arching an eyebrow. “And now you’re all grown up. You’re looking for commitment, right?”

His tone was laced with sarcasm.

“You said it,” I replied. And meant it. I wanted my days of bouncing Tiggerish from bed to bed to be over. They’d practically stopped as it was.

“So where is she?” he asked, looking around the pub. We were in The Old Bell. A lifeless, smoke-filled boozier. Always devoid of talent. Average age: sixty in the shade.

But it was my local. Like a nervous tick, or an odour problem – *it was mine*. It had a dart-board and a pool table and... it was the kind of pub where you could have a drink with a mate without the other punters conjecturing if you were queer.

“You’re kidding, aren’t you?” I said. “I don’t move that quickly.”

“If at all.”

“What does that mean?”

Ben sighed. He’s known me since school and therefore he knows me.

“Half the time I come down here, you’ve got some girl lined up. It’s always, ‘next time you’ll meet her, next time’. And she never shows up.”

I lit a cigarette and offered Ben one. He refused. Currently given up. It won’t last. It never does.

“Once or twice,” I said, getting back to the conversation. “That may have happened once or twice.”

Ben laughed. His big, friendly face creased, his eyes crinkled. “I can’t remember the last time I came down here and you had a date.”

“I’ve had dates in-between. You don’t have to meet every girl I go out with.”

But Ben was right. I’d been in Cirencester two years and never had a girlfriend. Oh.

Three or four times, I’d woken dry-mouthed and dazed to

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find someone in bed next to me. Someone I'd had to rush out the back door without breakfast, very early, to avoid panicking the jumpy milkman. But I hadn't had a girlfriend. I hadn't related to anyone. I hadn't committed. Not for a long time.

"Go on then," Ben said. "Tell me."

So I told him. I found it difficult to describe her impressively enough. But I tried.

Ben sat back in his chair.

"So let me get this straight. The times you've seen her, she's had her hair tied back, she's been wearing jeans covered in paint..."

"Yeah."

"She's a bit Sloaney. Slim, but she's got boobs. You think. And her mouth might be dodgy."

"No, she's got big lips."

"What colour are her eyes?"

"Don't know."

"Hair?"

"Brown...ish. Mousy. Streaky. I don't know. Look, it's not all this that matters. It's the feeling I get when she walks in the door."

"Which is like what? A hard-on?"

"Like I'm going to pass out."

"That big a hard-on?"

"No. She takes my breath away. My heart hammers. You know what I mean, don't you? I feel sweaty."

Ben shook his head. "Sounds like flu. Or badly cut Speed. Do you think she fancies you?"

"Who can say? I think so."

"Why would she fancy you?"

"Why not?"

"Err...you work in a travel agent's."

"I'm practically the boss."

"You work in a travel agent's. You drive a piece of shit. You earn less than a student."

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“I’ve just had a pay rise.”

“You earn the same as a student. Are you a catch?”

“I’m not fat.”

“Girls like fat. Makes them feel thin.”

“I’m in trouble then. Unless she likes my personality.”

“What – gibbering, obsessive wreck with no mates?”

“One mate. One fat mate who sells computers in London, supposedly earns a fortune, and has loads of sex.”

“I *do* earn a fortune,” he said, “and I do have loads of sex. Talking of which, how’s that Filipino hooker?”

“Filipina,” I said, stressing the ‘a’. “She was a girl.”

“What do you mean ‘was’?”

“I mean she’s moved out.”

“So what happened to her?”

“How should I know? She moved out, okay. I never even spoke to her. Her life story as far as I know is: she lived in the flat below mine, she got shagged out and left.”

“So who’s moved in?”

“A weirdo who looks just like a goblin.”

“A goblin?”

“Well,” I said, feeling the doubt in his gaze, “yeah. He does.”

“So where did he come from?”

“Somewhere else. I have no idea. He only moved in yesterday.”

“What does he look like? I mean, what does a goblin look like?”

“Like this bloke. Small, crazy looking.”

Ben smiled.

“You’re so full of shit,” he said. “Come on. Let’s go to the Crown. There’ll be some talent in there tonight. Maybe we’ll pull.”

“Maybe *I’ll* pull.”

I stubbed out my cigarette and we left.

At the Crown we got very, very drunk. Ben smoked. We didn’t pull.

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And when we got home, I swear my neighbour was prancing around a roaring bonfire, poking and waving a stick at the lawn.

“Yikes,” said Ben, who was also attempting to launder his language. “He does look like a goblin. It’s *Lord of the Rings*.”

“Good versus evil,” I replied wistfully, “it surrounds our lives.”

“Yeah, like debt and death.”

I shrugged and watched the man dance. He wasn’t bad. I wondered idly if he was a heavy drinker.

Chapter Two

I'd worked at the Go Away Travel Centre for two years. It doesn't fulfil a life-long dream. We workers in the service industry don't choose these jobs. They choose us. We slide down the greased vine of ambition. We start at Prime Minister or pub landlord and free-fall until we find our level. This is my level. Flights and hotels.

I don't mind. I have the odd day off (just me and the hang-over). I take holidays, but don't go anywhere interesting (I'm scared of flying; no, I'm not joking). I pretend to read intellectual novels (but they simply gather dust and pubes by the bed).

I'm not wild about my place of work, but it did me one big favour. For it was here, at the Go Away, that I met Daisy.

I remember I was flicking rubber bands at my co-worker Kate's cleavage (attractive and together, and that's just her breasts) when I heard a polite cough come from the other side of my desk. I hadn't even heard her come in.

I relinquished my stash of rubber bands and attempted a professional look. I found myself staring at a beautiful, if untamed, face; the dark eyes, the perky nose, the fine cheekbones and the sultry lips. I was immediately smitten. No, more than smitten. This was love, or at least mega-watt lust, at first sight. My heart stopped beating and then resumed, a little quicker. I looked down at my desk, as if kowtowing, then up again.

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Raising my eyebrows in what I hoped was a cool and controlled way, I said, “And what can I do for you?”

“Malta,” said the girl in her clipped, clear tone. “I need to go to Malta tomorrow. And sadly it’s got to be as cheap as you can make it.”

“Last minute flights tend not to be cheap,” I said, though I didn’t want to. I wanted to say she could have it for free. Or that I’d pay.

“I know, I know,” she said apologetically, vaguely flustered, biting down on her plump lower lip. “God, I know. I’m sorry. I’m not usually this disorganised. It’s...” She glanced at her watch. “Shit. I’ve got to be quick. What’s the best price you’ve got?”

The girl’s raw energy wafted over the desk as she leaned closer. My heart beat faster.

I scanned the booking system.

“When will you be returning?” I asked, squinting at the screen, almost unable to concentrate.

“I don’t know exactly.”

I told her she’d have to get a one-month return and I gave her the price.

She sighed, very sexily, and then looked pleadingly at me.

“It seems awfully expensive.”

“Short-haul flights are. It’s almost cheaper to fly to Asia. How about it?” I said. “Northern Thailand’s nice this time of year. We could...I mean you could...”

She smiled.

“Thailand’s tempting, but I need to go to Malta.”

My heart rate notched up another few bpm. Did she mean us in Thailand? Oooh. I thought fast. I didn’t want her to leave disappointed.

“I’ll tell you what. If you’ve got time, I can phone the airline direct and see if they’ve had any last-minute cancellations. We might get you a cheaper deal that way.”

She looked at her watch, mounted on a slender wrist, and bit

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her lower lip again.

“Yes, please,” she said, getting her mobile out of her pocket. “I’ve got to make a call while you do that. I’ll be back in a minute.”

She got up off the seat and I watched her slender but shapely backside stride out onto the sun-drenched street.

I pretended to make a phone call. I could have called BA, but the system told me the cheapest seats on the flight were still available.

I held a seat on the flight and waited for her to return.

Kate threw a ball of paper at me. “Put your tongue back in your mouth.”

“What?”

“You’re all over her like a rash.”

“I’m giving her my usual high level of customer service.”

“Bollocks. Your normal service is one price – take it or leave it.”

I frowned. Mock hurt. Daisy strode back in.

“Sorry about that,” she said, looking more relaxed. “I’ve bought myself another fifteen minutes. Did you speak to the airline?”

I gave her the news.

She was happier but still not making a move to lean over the desk and kiss me hard on the mouth.

“I fly loads. All over the world. I promise I’ll come back. I’ll be a good customer. It’s only this flight I need rock bottom. I don’t normally. Normally I’m cool with any price.”

I smiled knowingly and told her we could absorb the cost of the airport tax. “But that’s as good as it gets.”

“Good film,” she said, with a smile. “Have you seen it?”

I nodded, blushed, and booked her ticket.

“Because you’re flying tomorrow,” I said, “you’ll have to collect the ticket at Heathrow. I can’t issue it here.”

She looked concerned.

“It’s no problem; we do it all the time. It’s standard practice.”

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“If you’re sure.”

“Trust me.”

She smiled wider, this time revealing her (usually private) lower teeth, along with the more casually exposed top set. This was progress.

“And that’s it?”

“Apart from the money. Do you want to pay cash or card?”

She paid cash, flicking twenties off a roll of notes she produced from her back pocket.

“I hope you have a good holiday,” I said.

“Actually it’s work, but it should be fun.” She glanced at her watch again. “Christ, I’ve got to go. Thanks so much for your help.”

Getting up she noticed my stack of business cards.

“Oh, I’ll take one of these,” she said, picking one out with slender fingers. “Guy. That’s you, right?”

“That’s me.”

“You’ve been brilliant. See you soon.”

And with that she was gone. I watched her as she strode up the road into the cold, bright light. Then I looked at my screen. There was her name: ‘DAISY WARNFORD’.

Whoa, I thought. What a beautiful name. Not the Warnford bit. The Daisy. I’d picked a Daisy. Ha! She was definitely the one.

Chapter Three

I barely watch TV. I know, I know. What am I thinking? It's the twenty-first century. There are a thousand channels. The TV guide is the size of the *Yellow Pages*. I could spend all day in front of it, but... TV? The fool's lantern. It's all repeats, isn't it? And even the stuff that isn't repeats are rip-offs of Seventies' shows. The only time I switch on is for *The Simpsons* and sometimes *Top of the Pops*. And that's it. Oh, unless you count turning on the TV to watch a video, which I don't.

Kate and Debbie at work seem to have only one rule as regards television. When they're in, it's on. When they're out, it's not.

They watch every soap that's ever been aired. They also watch everything in-between, bar the news. Bar anything interesting.

This gives them a spectacular amount to natter about that doesn't involve me. I'm cool with this. But somehow they're not. They want my opinion on this, my view on that. They want me *involved*. Usually, I resist, claiming ignorance. But if anything happens at work, I'm stuck. I can't avoid it.

So, Daisy. The new topic. Kate went on and on about her every day. It was clear she'd created her own soap opera. She watched them at home, so why not a *live* one at work? For Kate, it was perfect. For me, it was pure pressure.

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It started from the moment Daisy left the shop.

“You terrible flirt!” she called from the opposite side of the office, our desks being in a U-shape with the customers surrounded in the middle, like penned-in sheep bleating for help.

I simply rolled my eyes. “Every time a good-looking girl comes in you say that.”

“But you were at your best yet today. You were practically dribbling!”

“I was not.”

“You were. Debbie? Wasn’t he?”

“He was very attentive.” She said this as if I wasn’t there, and she sits next to me. Luckily, Carol, our boss, was out of the office at lunch and Ted was downstairs organising brochures or something. It didn’t stop Kate telling him when he reappeared through the nylon curtain.

“Ted, you should have seen Guy. My God!”

I sat there and took it. Like Foreman vs Ali. The Rumble in the Jungle. There was no point denying it. Ted just smiled, said “So what?” and got on with some filing. I think he’s still a virgin. He claims to have a girlfriend, but I’ve never met her. Nor has anyone else. He’s very quiet, is Ted. If he were punctuation, he’d be parentheses, or a space. Something discreet.

Kate, on the other hand, is a double exclamation mark. When she started last year, she blew me away. I told Ben I’d met ‘the one’. Natural blonde, aerobic-looking figure, usually clothed in tight-fitting, sweat-inducing garments. (My sweat, not hers.) Turned out she had a boyfriend. Shit.

When Carol got in it was the same. Kate carried on about me and Daisy. That girl has one hell of a big mouth on her.

“You wait until she comes back next month,” she gasped at Carol. “You’ll see I’m not lying. He was drooling at the mouth. Like a dog.”

Carol laughed. “No harm in that, so long as it keeps the customer happy.”

I flicked a ‘V’ sign at Kate. “I haven’t seen you sell a bundle

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of flights today,” I said. “Why don’t you do some work, rather than spying on me?”

“And how much did you make on the flight you sold her?” she asked, eyebrows practically hitting her hairline.

“Not much.”

“How much?”

“None of your business.”

“I looked it up. You sold it to her for net; you didn’t make a penny on it. And we can’t deduct the tax.”

Carol looked at me.

“I’m thinking of the future. She’ll come back and then we’ll make some money from her.”

“Just so long as you do,” Carol warned. “And I expect you to pay the tax.”

“Of course,” I said. “Chill out.”

That night, back at the estate agent’s worst nightmare, I cracked open a few cans of Stella and re-capped every part of my conversation with Daisy, trying to work out if she fancied me as much as I fancied her.

One or two things counted in my favour. She took my business card. She said my name with some shy emphasis. She said, “See you soon.” My heart skipped every time I thought of that. “See you soon.” It was the best ‘see you soon’ I’d ever received. I drank a few more cans of Stella thinking of the way she’d said it. Did she mean it, would we meet again, or was it just a phrase I’d distorted for my own benefit?

I gazed out of the window to ponder this crucial point. Below, in the night haze, I could see the guy next door preparing a fire. He really was a strange little fellow. And he looked just like a goblin, even Ben agreed. I drank and watched. He lit the fire and started prancing around it. I imagined Daisy and I dancing with him, and then (much better) without him, naked and free in a nicer, more private garden... with a swimming pool, gazebo, barbecue, cocktails... I receded from the window and

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into a complete reverie.

“Daisy,” I said aloud. “You are definitely the one.”

I don't know what Daisy's month in Malta was like but my four weeks in Cirencester involved lost luggage, expired visas, missed (panic!) typhoid injections, double-booked hotels and delirious delays.

My job stuck to its well-worn routine, as did my body. The twin peaks of my existence were solid. Most people had a triumvirate of concerns – work, health, *love life*. Not me. I had no love life. It eluded me like a parking space eluded the white-knuckled London driver. It jinked past me like a frightened cat in a dark alley. It consistently sold me the dummy like George Best in his prime.

For the sake of symmetry, this was preferable. Two arms, two legs, two spots (one on my forehead, one on my arse)... two areas of anxiety. Two was enough, really. Two was...plenty.

So I had an okay month. Sold a load of flights, started sweating it in the gym with the other poor muscle-free souls (mostly so I could truthfully tell Daisy I went there) and got pissed every weekend. And most weekdays.

Ben came down at the start of spring. That's when I told him about Daisy.

I was desperate to see her again. But I also dreaded it.

As each day ended without her visiting, I felt sadness and relief. Sadness that she wasn't desperate to see me. Relief that I hadn't suffered the horror of trying to talk to her in front of my work colleagues.

But I missed her. And Kate didn't help. At least once a week she would say in a loud voice, so everyone could hear, “She hasn't come back then? The lovely Daisy. You must be losing your touch.” Or, “You must be gutted, selling that flight at net and she still doesn't come back.”

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I ignored these jibes, busying myself with brochures or checking the special offers. Kate rarely let it go.

“No,” I’d say. “Jesus, you’re observant. I mean you should have been a spy or a detective, or something.”

And she’d say, “Ooh. Tetchy,” or, “I didn’t realise you liked her that much,” or, “You know if you’re still thinking about her, she could be the one. She could be.”

I’d nod distractedly and comfort myself with the thought that whereas I once fancied Kate, I could now see what a pain in the arse she was and actually pitied, rather than envied, her boyfriend.

Sometimes Kate would go too far and get the sharp tongue treatment from Carol. Then she would briefly shut up. Get her head down and look busy. She was scared of Carol, ever since the day she bawled her out for being rude to a customer.

Carol was good to work for but she wouldn’t have anyone be rude to customers. To Carol the customer was ‘King’. ‘Top Dog’. ‘It’. It was simple business practice. It didn’t require a three-year BSc to work out.

But clearly this didn’t work with Daisy. With Daisy, I couldn’t have been more charming. And she hadn’t come close to the Go Away again. She was the exception, as lecturers and teachers are liable to haughtily pronounce, that proves the rule.

“You’ve been away,” I kept thinking, “now come back.” I needed her. I needed to bask in the glow of her beauty once again. I craved her presence like a smoker craves cigarettes or a junkie craves junk. I wasn’t getting it. And I was in withdrawal.

Between you and me, I’d adopted some very sad practices. So sad, I was scaring myself.

I was hanging out at places I thought she might show up. Pubs and coffee shops around town. DIY stores (you remember the paint on the jeans?) and (less likely) Natwest Bank. (I’d spotted a NatWest Visa in her wallet.) Not to mention the library, the gym, and all the usual places, like the park on a sunny day.

So in April and May I became a caffeine freak and an

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alcoholic. I redecorated my flat three times, and opened two new savings accounts and a Current Plus Fast Track. Fast track to what, I didn't know.

I borrowed books from the library I never read. I paid to lift weights I couldn't lift. It was rarely sunny, and when the sky did brighten it was ice-cold and I got flu from being intangibly dressed in the park.

My life was in ruins. My obsession was killing me. And then she showed up. And it all got much, much worse.

Chapter Four

Spirits are not really my thing. I'm not talking about ghosts or apparitions. I'm talking about the hard stuff. Whisky, gin, vodka. I drink cans and cans of beer, bottles of wine. In the summer, Pimms and Martinis, champagne, but I try to stay off the liquor.

It's not that I don't like it. I'm a drinker. I like the strong stuff more than anything. That's why I don't touch it. Because if I do, it gets drunk by the half bottle.

In one of my kitchen cupboards I keep half-a-dozen bottles of red wine, at least twelve cans of Stella, two bottles of champagne (supermarket brand), and right at the back a bottle of vodka, a bottle of whisky and a bottle of ginger wine.

The stuff at the back is for emergencies.

Wednesday had been an appalling day. Yes, the customers of the Go Away were flying all round the globe, as they requested, but they all seemed to be heading for the wrong destinations. Carol was on her day off, Kate had PMT, and Debbie and Ted both seemed useless, or not interested.

At lunchtime, when I presumed nothing could get any worse, one of the low-cost airline's entire fleet decided to strike.

It was left to me to sort out the mess.

"Yes, Mrs Connor," I said to the old lady on the line, "I do appreciate you need to get to Dublin today; we are doing our

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best to find you another airline. Can I put you on hold for a second?"

I jabbed at a button on the phone and slammed the receiver on the desk.

"Why can't she just swim there?" I wailed at no one in particular.

"I don't swim," came the crackling reply over the speaker phone. I'd hit 'hands free' instead of hold.

I couldn't apologise enough, but it didn't help. I was assured I would be reported to my superior in the morning.

At five o'clock, when it seemed the most likely outcome of the stress was to suffer a hernia, a regular and important client of mine rang to book a last-minute flight to New York. She had to leave the following morning. All of the flights and I mean all of the flights to New York were booked, except business class. She couldn't afford that. I kept trying, using the system to call the airlines. Eventually, just before six, I found a vacancy: flying from Stansted. I phoned to okay this with the client. It was not okay. It had to be Heathrow or Gatwick. It took me another half-hour to sort that out. And another hour to take care of all the other problems that had arisen, like the undead, during the day.

I got home at nine. The electricity was off.

"That's it," I muttered.

I fumbled my way to the kitchen and forced my hand to the back of the cupboard. It took me three attempts with the torch to get the right combination of bottles. When I found them, I ripped the tops off and threw them in the bin. Whisky and ginger wine.

I put my CD walkman on, lit a candle, slumped on the sofa and poured a drink.

"Cheers," I said, over the sound of hard rock crashing into my ears. "Goodbye day. Hello oblivion."

Much later, when I staggered up to piss in the sink, bladder on the brink of bursting its banks, I peered out of the kitchen window.

White Summer

Below were the strawberry and mustard flames of a bonfire, and whirling round it a small, naked figure, softly playing a pipe.

The goblin, I thought, has had a bad day too.

The next morning I woke half on, half off the sofa. My back a ricrac, or chicane. Bright sunshine slanted in through the half-closed shutters of the living room. My mouth felt as if some unknown tease had poured diesel into it and then filled it with charcoal. Looking at my watch, I saw it was nearly ten. This didn't bother me (I assumed it was Saturday), but as the chemistry in my brain remarried, I shot off the sofa like I'd been zapped by a cattle prod.

It wasn't Saturday; it was Thursday.

Ripping my shirt off, and hauling myself out of my trousers, I leapt into the shower. The electricity had been off all night. The water was stingingly cold. I expect they heard my screams in South Cerney.

I had no time to shave, organise my hair, or staunch the flow of effluvia from my pits. Ludicrously, on opening my wardrobe, I found no clean shirts. Not one. I had no choice but to re-use the one I'd slept in. My suit looked like a road accident.

"I am..." I said, as I downed a pint of water before heading for the door, "just... my own worst nightmare."

The timing of my arrival at work could not have been worse. If I'd arrived four hours late, it would have been better. As it was I arrived just as Carol said into her phone, "Yes, I do apologise. Again. And we will ensure this won't happen in the future... thanks. Yes, thank you for your call."

She put the phone down and looked at me the way a wife would look at her adulterous husband. With hatred, loathing, contempt.

Luke Bitmead

“That was Mrs Connor,” she said. “Mrs Connor who should be in Dublin at her friend’s wedding, but is, in fact, in some second-rate hotel room in Stansted. I assume you have an explanation for this.”

I bit my lip.

“For swearing at her over the phone... and for wandering in at ten-thirty looking like you’ve just been scraped off the pavement.”

The office went dead silent. I’ve heard rowdier old peoples’ homes on a Sunday afternoon after a heavy lunch.

I thought of saying, “Hey, but at least the sun’s shining” with an Anne Robinson cheeky grin and wink, but fast realised this annoys anyone in their correct mind. Instead, I played it straight. I said, “My father phoned me at work late yesterday afternoon. My mother’s taken a turn for the worse. He was stuck in London, so I went to see her. I ended up staying the night. That’s why I’m late.”

Kate coughed a muffled “bullshit” into her open palm. Carol fixed me with her most serious look.

“I understand your mother’s ill,” she said. “But... I think we need to have a little chat in the back office.”

As boss and employee, Carol and I get along very well. She knows I work hard. She knows I do a good job, so she cuts me a bit of slack if I’m late or take a long lunch.

The one thing she won’t stand for is lying.

In the back office, she said to me, hands on hips like a matron addressing one of her minions, “I’m going to give you one more chance to tell me why you were late and then I’m going to drop it. But I want the truth.”

I took a deep breath and told her again. The same story. The same lie.

I didn’t feel too bad. No one tells the truth now. Not with politicians lying every other word. Not in the 2000s: *The Lying Odyssey*.

White Summer

You can't afford to tell the truth these days. If you did, you'd never get anywhere. You wouldn't get a job. You wouldn't get an overdraft, insurance, a loan for a car, sex... lying is a way of life.

She gave me a very hard look. It made beads of perspiration rise up on my forehead like tiny mushrooms in time-lapse photography.

She said, "I hope she gets better soon."

"Thanks. But I think getting better is out of the question. Staying about the same is the most we can hope for."

"Now about Mrs Connor."

I looked gauche. My breath became fricative. The lecture I got lasted fifteen minutes. The gist of it was: you're very good; you could go far; don't ruin it.

I nodded, agreed and looked chastened throughout. But I could barely hear what Carol was saying. The hum of my hangover was deafening in my ears.

"Now get out there, write a letter of apology and then get on with what you do best. Sell some flights."

I assured her I would and lurched back into the office, head down like a wounded bull, with no intention of doing anything but wallowing in self-pity for the rest of the day. And then dying.

As I began to feel the shakes coming on, the roaring DTs accompanied by head spin and dehydration, the door opened. Too-bright sunlight hit my desk and blinded me. Then she appeared, like an angel out of the transcendental haze... Daisy.

I plunged into a free-fall state of shock. I actually gripped the desk to steady myself.

She raised her eyebrows, easing herself gracefully into the seat opposite. My heart was lodged under my Adam's apple, attempting to climb into my mouth.

I croaked, "Hi," and then said hurriedly so I could get away and calm myself, "Would you like a cup of coffee? I'm having one."

"Oh," she said, surprised at the service (I think). "Thanks.

Luke Bitmead

That would be... lovely.”

I sprang off my chair and fled to the back office, flicking on the kettle and lighting a cigarette, all in one fluid movement.

I inhaled deeply, trying to calm myself. It didn't work. My heart hammered on as if I was about to give an unplanned half-hour speech to a packed concert hall the size of Wembley Stadium. On the perils of drink.

“Be cool,” I whispered to myself, “be cool.”

As I spaded the coffee into the cups, Kate idled in, fixing me with a hooded stare. Pure *femme fatale*.

“God, you've got it so bad,” she said with near contempt. “It's embarrassing.”

“I don't know what you're talking about.”

“Look at your hands!” she said, as I splashed water over the Formica. “They're shaking like an old man's.”

“That's because I'm hungover,” I snapped, getting irritated. “I mean did you come in here for a reason? Or are you just intent on annoying the hell out of me?”

She put a hand on my shoulder and smiled.

“I'm only teasing,” she said. “Actually I think it's quite sweet.”

“Great,” I said. “I'm so happy. Can you hold the door open for me? I need to get back out there without burning my hands.”

Kate nodded and pulled the door open.

“Go get 'em,” she said, rather too loudly, allowing the door to swing shut before I'd trickled through it, catching my elbow and nearly pirouetting me into the filing cabinet.

I tottered back to my desk, my nerves percussive in their throb and jangle.

“There you go,” I said to Daisy's chest, not daring to look her in the eye, scared she'd see the desire there. “So how was your trip?”

I sat down and pushed my chair back so I could look at her; also far enough away so she wouldn't see the sweat or smell the whisky coming off me, like cartoon lines, above my aching

White Summer

bonce. Then my chair got snarled in my computer cable and I nearly went over backwards, but luckily I only spilt half of my coffee. She laughed (with sympathy).

When she stopped, she said, "My time in Malta was very good, thank you."

"When did you get back?"

"Oh three, four weeks ago. Something like that."

I felt a twinge of... disappointment, jealousy, embarrassment? She'd been back all this time and hadn't come to see me?

"Anyway," she said, rubbing slender hands on clean, black combat trousers, which surely housed slender thighs, "I need you to book me another flight."

"That's what we're here for," I said, feeling used, taken advantage of. Like a hooker. "Where are we going to next?"

"Dublin. A holiday this time."

Cripes, I thought. Let's hope I don't do a Mrs Connor.

"Been before?"

"Never."

"You'll like it," I said, though I'd never been. "Beautiful city, lovely pubs, interesting museums."

"And the people?"

"Dublin's a city. With all that entails. You don't really get to meet that many people. You'd need to head out to the West Country for that."

"Oh," she said, looking disappointed.

"When would you like to go? The cheapest carrier is on strike at the moment. To be safe, I'd have to book you with BA. They won't be too much more expensive."

"That's fine." I noticed again the slight upturn of the nose. Very cute. "We'd like to go next week."

I busied myself with the booking system as I recovered from the shock of 'we'.

"Pick a day," I said, still looking at the screen. "They're all available."

It took some time for Daisy to decide when she wanted to fly

Luke Bitmead

out and when she wanted to return. I couldn't work out if she was trying to spend more time with me by dragging it out, or whether she was just naturally ditzzy.

Once we'd agreed dates, I asked the dreaded question.

"Can you give me the name of the person you're travelling with?"

"Oh, yeah, that might help," she giggled. "The name's Oliver."

I choked on jealous bile.

"Claire Oliver."

Relief flooded my system. So much so I completely lost concentration and had to get her to repeat the name.

"You got it this time?"

I'd got it. "I had a bit of a heavy night last night. My head's pounding."

"Oh, where were you?" She sounded interested, like she had a busy social life. Wanted to know any good place to go.

I couldn't say at home getting pissed on my own, so I said, "I was at..." and then I felt Carol's eyes come up from her work and fix on me, so I stuttered, "I mean... sadly, I had to visit my mother who's not well. And I was up with her half the night."

"Oh dear." She looked genuinely concerned. "I hope it's nothing serious."

"Well, it's... under control. Most of the time."

The silence throbbed, like a submarine.

"Anyway. Do you want to come and collect your tickets, or shall I post them?"

"Ah." She thought about it. I considered either to be a good option. If she came in to collect them then I'd see her again. If she gave me her address, I'd know where she lived. I could find out what her local was and camp out there. *Live* there.

"I can probably come and get them, actually. When will they be ready?"

"Any time after two tomorrow."

"Okay, I might come in then. Or if not, Monday."

White Summer

“Fine. Anything else I can do for you? Hotels, car hire?”

“No, we’re staying with friends the first couple of days, then we’re going to find B&Bs. Thanks anyway.”

“No problem. How do you want to pay?”

She gave me a wad of cash. I felt like a thief taking her money. And then she was gone again.

“So the romance continues,” said Kate, once the door had closed. “Is this going to be unrequited love?”

I raised an eyebrow.

“I mean if you don’t ask her out, nothing’s ever going to happen.”

“You can’t ask her out in here,” said Carol. “It’s unprofessional. You’ll have to grab her off the street.”

“I can’t ask her out full stop. I can barely look her in the eye.”

“Ah, how sweet,” said Debbie.

“Chicken,” said Kate.

Ted kept quiet. He was picking at a tuna sandwich.

“Besides, I haven’t got time for a relationship,” I said, heading for the loo. “I’m just too busy.”

The office tittered at me.

I pissed in the bowl thinking that, with all the nerves and everything, I hadn’t done too badly. At least I hadn’t completely put her off.

Then I looked in the mirror. I had a bit of sleep in my right eye. It looked like a chunk of cheddar big enough to catch a large mouse, or even a rat. There was a whisky stain on my shirt, my hair was sticking up at the back like a greasy teepee and my teeth were as yellow as urine.

“You old charmer,” I grimaced, and tried to sort myself out with loo roll and a nail brush.

It didn’t work. I returned to work looking like Wurzel Gumage’s half-brother. And not the better half.