

Poppy Shakespeare

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Published by Bloomsbury

Extract

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First published 2006

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Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 36 Soho Square, London W1D 3QY

A CIP catalogue record for this book
is available from the British Library

ISBN 0 7475 8046 4
EAN-13 9780747580461

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Typeset by Hewer Text UK Ltd, Edinburgh
Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Bloomsbury Publishing, London, New York and Berlin

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‘Since prisons and madhouses exist, why,
somebody is bound to sit in them’ *Anton Chekhov*

I. How it all begun

I'm not being funny, but you can't blame me for what happened. All I done was try and help Poppy out. Same as I would of anyone, ain't my fault is it, do you know what I'm saying, not making like Mother Teresa, but that's how I am.

It weren't like you realised anyway, not at the time, not that first Monday morning. It weren't like you seen it all then and there when Poppy come strolling in them doors with her six-inch skirt and her twelve-inch heels; it weren't like you seen it all laid out, the whole fucking shit of the next six months, like a trailer, do you know what I'm saying, the whole fucking shit of *the rest of our lives*, which the way I'm feeling, do you know what I'm saying, most probably come down to the same.

Poppy Shakespeare, that was her name. She got long shiny hair like an advert. 'Shakespeare?' I said when Tony told me. 'Fuckin'ell bet she's smart.'

Tony smiled at the carpet, like this flicker of a smile, like a lighter running low on fluid.

'So what am I s'posed to *show* her?' I said. 'I don't know nothing, do I,' I said.

'Just show her around the place,' he said. 'Introduce her to people, that sort of thing.'

'Nah,' I said and I shaken my head. 'Ain't up to it, Tony.'

Sorry; I'm not. Does my head in, that sort of thing. What you asking *me* for?' I said.

But Jesus, if you'd of heard him go on! Weren't nobody else would do, he said. Weren't nobody else in the world, he said, not Astrid Arsewipe – couldn't argue with that – not Middle-Class Michael, not no one at all, alive or dead or both or neither, known as much about dribbling as I did.

2. How Tony Balaclava got a point

Fact is I been dribbling since before I was even born. My mum was a dribbler and her mum as well, 'cept she never seen her hardly, grown up in a home while they scooped out bits of her mother's brain, like a tater, taken the bad bits out, till she never even knew she *got* a daughter no more and all she could do was dribble and shit, and one time I seen her, went with my mum, and it done my head in a bit to be honest, all humps and hollows and wispy white hair but afterwards Mum said what the fuck. 'Come on, N,' she said, 'let's what the fuck!' and we gone to this massive like stately home except it weren't it was a hotel, but that's what you'd think, you'd think, *Brideshead Refuckingvisited*, which my mum loved that programme, give her ideas, and she gets us this room like the size of a church, starts ordering salmon and champagne and shit and dancing around in her underwear, which I don't know why she was down to that but she was, I remember it certain. And then I remember the knock at the door, she was twirling her tights round her head at the time, and policemen and handcuffs and, 'You come with me, love. Your mum will be fine; she's just not very well.' Like news to me, do you know what I'm saying, and I give her 'Fuck off!' and wriggled her arm off my shoulders.

When Mum weren't twirling her tights round her head,

she was hanging off bridges and slashing her arms and swallowing pills by the bottle and shit, till one Tuesday evening 6.15, Mill Hill East station, not that it matters, she jumped in front of a train and that was the end of it.

When I weren't living with Mum I got fostered out, or I stayed down Sunshine House which was better 'cause none of the staff give a fuck, and you done what you wanted. Back then we was into sniffing glue and the longer you sniffed, like the harder you was, and this one time it's me against Nasser the Nose and everyone's cheering, do you know what I'm saying, and the next thing I know I come round six months later playing pool on the caged-in balcony of this unit for fucked-up kids.

After that it was like I never looked back. By thirteen I been diagnosed with everything in the book. They had to start making up new disorders, just to have me covered, then three days before I turned seventeen, they shipped me up to the Abaddon to start my first six-month section.

Don't get me wrong. I ain't after the sympathy vote. The only reason I'm telling you this is just to prove how for once in his life Tony weren't talking out of his arse; he got a point and a fair enough point and in the end I had to admit, weren't no one better qualified to show Poppy round than me.

3. A bit about the Dorothy Fish and the Abaddon and stuff like that you can skip if you been there already

At the time all this happened I was going to the Dorothy Fish, which in case you don't know is a day hospital, and in case you don't know what one of *them* is, it's this place where you go there every day and when it shuts at half-four you go back down the hill to your flat on the Darkwoods Estate.

Most probably you's wanting the history as well, like why did they call it the Dorothy Fish, but I ain't going into none of that on account of I don't know. Middle-Class Michael said they called it after this lady or something, 'The widow of Thompson Fish,' he said, 'the haulage man,' like you ought to know, who give all her money to dribblers when she fallen out with her daughter. Rosetta said she'd heard they'd called it after this nurse, like a tribute. But Astrid said bollocks to both of them. *Everyone* knew Dot Fish, she said, she was manageress down the Kwik Kleen launderette, got stabbed to death and stuffed in the spin drier when a customer mistaken her for a tiger. Sue thought it must be an anagram and she used to get Verna to try and crack it, but they never got further than 'history' and some shit that didn't work out.

The Dorothy Fish was on the first floor of the Abaddon – that's *Abba*-don's how you say it. And the Abaddon Unit was this huge red tower as tall as the sky, stood on top of

this enormous hill. Above the Dorothy Fish you got impatient wards, stacked up like a chest of drawers. No one even known how many; the lift stopped at seven but there was loads more than that. If you looked from the bottom of Abaddon Hill, the tower was so tall you couldn't even make out the top of it. It gone up so high you couldn't see the windows and it kept going up until all you could see was this faint red line disappearing into the clouds. Professor Max McSpiegel said that even if you could see all the floors, you'd run out of numbers to count them with before you got halfway up. Said the tower was so tall if you got to the top you'd see right around the world and back in through the windows behind you.

The way it worked at the Abaddon was the madder you was, the higher you gone, then they move you down through the floors as you get better. And as you moved down you could do more things. On the seventh you couldn't do practically nothing, you couldn't even take a piss in private 'cause the toilets hadn't got no doors on them. On the fourth they'd let you have a bath though you had to use your foot for a plug and they checked you every three minutes. When you reached the second you was allowed to go out, like round to the Gatehouse or Paradise Park, so long as you come back in time for your meds and didn't take the Michael. It was all meant to get you to lay off the mad stuff and start acting normal, like showing a dog a treat to make it sit.

From the eighth floor up it was one-way traffic and that's about all I can tell you. If you gone up the eighth floor you never come back, just disappeared like crap up the hose of a hoover. In the Dorothy Fish we used to call it 'The Floor of

No Return' 'cause even with all the bragging and bollocks what pours out of mouth of your average dribbler as thick as the clouds of cheap fag smoke, you never met no one who'd claim they been there, or no one aside of Candid Headphones which just proves my point that I'm saying.

The Dorothy Fish was the best of both worlds: you was getting the help but you done what the fuck you wanted. All day long we sat in the first-floor common room, with its wall of windows looking down over London: St Paul's the size of a teenager's tit, Canary Wharf, the London Eye, the Thames twisting through like the width of a worm, fuck knows how many flats and streets and shops and offices and shit, and all those millions of sniffs, crossing the windows every day and back again each evening, all shrunk into ten panes of reinforced glass. Us day dribblers sat across the back with our feet on the tables smoking our fags and flicking our ash in the brown metal bins at our sides. The flops, what was allowed off the wards, they sat in two rows under the windows, smoking their fag butts and flicking their ash on the carpet. The carpet was the filthiest carpet you ever seen in your life. You couldn't even tell what colour it was on account of it was so fucking filthy. The walls was a pale shitty brown from the smoke and across the back wall above our heads was this line of yellow rectangles where there'd used to be pictures but they'd took them down 'cause the flops kept throwing their cups at them and breaking the glass. You could still see the splashes where the coffee exploded and run down the shitty brown walls. In one of the rectangles Zubin drawn this picture of Tony Balaclava, with his beaky nose and his purdy hair and triangular fangs like his teeth had been sharpened with a nail file.

The reason the flops kept throwing their cups was on account of the fact they was jealous. What they said was we clogged up the system, like stopped them from getting moved down. The flops said we eaten their cake or whatever, and we didn't *want* to leave. Which was bollocks, and even if it *weren't*, if we wanted to stay then that *proved* we was mad and if we was mad we weren't ready to leave. It was Zubin worked that out and Zubin was smart; you couldn't even tell if he was joking half the time.