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Barbarians

Written by Tim Glencross

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Barbarians

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I

Art, ruined

'Ah – it's the beautiful young things.'

Buzzy sways, partly from the G and T she has just gulped down, and for a moment sublime even in its awkwardness presses against Marcel as the two of them (not a couple, alas) sidestep Sherard Howe, their host. Puffing on a cigar, the latter resembles an ageing Tweedledum, with his hoisted trousers, spindly legs and cannonball middle. But his real tragedy, Buzzy cannot help thinking, is his jowls. Without the avalanche of flesh beneath the line of his lower lip, he would be – and probably once was – a handsome man, given his surprisingly delicate mouth and quick grey eyes of a hunter. Reflexively, Buzzy brushes her own jawline: in mild panic she imagines she can feel the beginnings of a soft mound beneath her chin. She must drink less; either that or join a gym, as everyone else suddenly seems to be doing. Though if the chin situation ever becomes as out of control as Sherard's, there is always suicide.

As if they are not expecting to discover a house full of strangers, Buzzy and Marcel stop in the hallway and look uncertainly back at Sherard. With a smile that might be pitying or might be amused, he squeezes past them, almost burning a trail across Buzzy's forehead with his cigar in the process. From ahead comes his commanding boom, 'Keep straight, follow me.' They pass roomfuls of guests keeping up a relentless chatter and wafting flutes of champagne. Howe custom is to serve Dom Ruinart for the first hour, Afua once explained; after that everyone (or almost everyone) has to make do with the 'R' de.

Buzzy wonders if they are being discreetly led as far from the epicentre of the party as possible, a suspicion that is confirmed when they end up in the kitchen.

'I'm sure I saw Henry and Afua in here – they were helping Daphne.' Sherard's basso causes the army of caterers to look up in unison from preparing the trays of drinks and hors d'oeuvres. Buzzy smiles at a harried waitress, a recent graduate of around her age, who squeezes past to replenish her ranks of stuffed squid. Sherard takes a lordly puff on his cigar, oblivious to the fact that he is in everyone's way, before abruptly swivelling and returning to the throng.

It's not clear if he intended Buzzy and Marcel to follow, but follow they do. Sherard looks mildly annoyed, having squeezed the arm of the culture secretary and exchanged kisses with Juliet Stevenson ('My dear, I demand another Chekhov'), introduced Tariq Ali to Mehdi Hasan and instructed a drinks waiter to avoid the ageing Young British Artist drunkenly denouncing Sir Nicholas Serota, to find the two of them still by his side. Buzzy is conscious of him taking them in, properly now. Not for the first time, she wishes she possessed Marcel's ease, his foreigner's ability simply to stand there, a hint of a smile at his mouth. Perhaps sensing this, Sherard's darting gaze passes over Marcel and settles on her. She feels under suspicion for her suburban upbringing, which smacks of Toryness, however submerged, and for her uncertain position in relation to Sherard's son (Afua, two years his senior, is Henry's sort of sister; Marcel is Afua's boyfriend. Buzzy is Henry's vague non-girlfriend girlfriend).

'Now don't tell me your name . . .'

She tells him it's Elizabeth. When he looks confused, she says he might know her as Buzzy, the silly childhood name she is trying and mostly failing to shed.

'Buzzy, yes. Henry tells me you've been in South America.'

'Yes – Argentina. I got back about a week ago.'

'Did you, ah.' Sherard sucks on his cigar twice in quick succession, his wandering eye obscured under cover of a thick cloud of smoke – or so he seems to think.

Summoning her courage, Buzzy says, 'Now I'm on the dreaded job-hunt. But with arts and the media, which is what I'm *really* interested in, openings are so difficult to come by . . .'

Sherard frowns, and she waits heart-in-mouth for the response (*Time Out* is looking for a film reviewer? *Dazed & Confused* a features writer? Martin Amis an amanuensis?). 'I was in Rio a couple of months ago.'

Confused, she replies, 'Oh, as in Brazil?'

'Well not as in the Rio Grande, my dear.' Buzzy gives a startled smile: she is unused to being patronised. 'I was there for the *MoMA in Rio* show. I collect a little, as you can see.' He gestures towards the walls, which are covered, aside from one very small portrait – an oily nude that looks as if it might be a Lucian Freud – with abstract-ish pieces from the nineties: one of Gary Hume's life-size Door Paintings; a Tracey Emin monoprint entitled *Fucking Margate*; a framed splash of yellow by Sandra Blow. 'Discovered a wonderful young photographer – Romero Ferreira?' This seems directed at Marcel in particular, as though it were just the sort of thing a Belgian might know.

Marcel times his response artfully, leaving enough of a pause to imply that he is acquainted with several emerging Rio artists, but alas Romero Ferreira is not one of them.

'Well he's about to be very hot in New York. Actually he's here this evening, you must meet him.'

'That might be interesting,' Buzzy says airily, in the manner, she hopes, of one anticipating many claims on her time besides hot Brazilians. The other two look at her as though her continued presence were something unexpected, and she feels blood rushing to her cheeks.

Sherard asks Marcel how he finds working for Devereux, the head of the department he has just joined at Sullivan and Ball. 'I was at school with him, you know. Rather a bully back then.' Buzzy listens while Marcel talks enthusiastically about his boss, in marked contrast with his demeanour in the pub earlier, where he sipped the gin and tonic bought with her dwindling funds, nodding politely but not really listening to her prattle about

Genoese immigrants and the birth of the tango. Before disappearing, Sherard introduces Marcel to Sir Ronnie Goldstein, a Labour Party donor who does something with a hedge fund (owns it perhaps?) and who wants to discuss the US government rescue of Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac. Two years ago, before she went away and he started his job at the law firm, Marcel might have confided to Buzzy what he thought of this topic via the merest twitch of an eyebrow, the bushy blackness of which she now finds herself admiring.

On the other side of the room she spies Afua, talking to a youngish man in faded jeans and a T-shirt that says THE GOOD GUYS DON'T SHINE AT MIDNIGHT; early thirties perhaps, nicely tanned but goggle-eyed. Afua smiles and beckons her over. It is a compassionate act – she has evidently seen Buzzy's discomfort and is offering her an escape route – that Buzzy resents since, unknown to Afua, they are engaged in permanent social competition. Buzzy is not winning.

'Can I get anyone a glass of champagne?' she asks.

Sir Ronnie, to whom Buzzy seems to be invisible, wafts a half-filled flute towards Marcel, and says, 'Of course the *real* story is the US Treasury buying mortgage-backed securities . . .'

Buzzy drifts off in search of champagne, not in the direction of Afua. She can't quite bear how amazing she looks in that black dress with the red shawl draped around her shoulders, like Gauguin's *Sorcerer of Hiva Oa*. She narrowly avoids a head-butting from a blonde radio presenter who throws her head back in mirth as someone says 'he thought it was *Peter* he was talking to!' What should she respond, if someone asks her what it is that she does? Is it acceptable to describe herself as a writer when she has only written four poems? It feels like an unconvincing line, particularly when there in the corner is Ian McEwan, looking at his feet while Lord Bragg gesticulates grandly next to him (of course neither of *them* has been left without champagne). She'll have to play the outsider, the spirit of Youth.

At last! A bearer of champagne ahead, with a single remaining glass on her tray. The sight of the gleaming bubbles causes the

back of her throat to itch. Her stride becomes more determined, her *excuse me*s faintly impatient instead of apologetic. Three more steps and she is there . . . But then as if divining Buzzy's presence, a generous form resting slightly apart from a group of drinkers turns round and blocks her path to the waitress, who slips away.

'Hello Henry, this is quite a gathering.'

'Buzzy, it's l-lovely to see you. Welcome back.' He kisses her, wetly, on each cheek.

Surprisingly touched, she replies, 'Thanks. It's nice, you know, to see you too.'

'How was Buenos Aires?'

'Oh fine, fine. My school was in a neighbourhood called Hurlingham, so they were already fairly civilised.'

He nods gravely, as if genuinely reassured by this news. She realises this is all she wants to say of her last two years, even before he points and says, 'Look, there's Afua. Doesn't she look fabulous in that dress?'

'Too fabulous.'

'We should rescue her. She's been stuck with that chap for ages – some Brazilian artist my father knows. I think he's interested in her.'

'Aren't we all?' Buzzy says, mischievously, before hurrying on: 'But first you must tell me, how are *you*, Henry Bean? What have you been up to?'

'Me?' he asks, colouring slightly. 'Nothing really. I started the Bar Vocational Course – law school, you know – but it wasn't . . . So I'm just sort of thinking at the moment. My father wants me to work for a friend of his in the government, a junior minister, except I don't know if politics is really, you know . . .' Henry takes a large gulp of his champagne, which Buzzy notes out of envy and because he is not normally an enthusiastic drinker. Poor flapping Henry, so used to ceding the limelight to his beautiful half-black semi-sister.

As though Buzzy's attention is too much for him, he says, 'Really we should rescue Afua from the Latin fellow. Is Marcel here?'

'We arrived together, so he must be here somewhere. I'll join you – I'm dying to catch up with Afua – but first I'd quite like to find a drink.'

'Oh, there's someone with champagne now.' Henry looks past her shoulder and Buzzy twists her body round with undignified urgency. She's dismayed when she sees the waiter is doing top-ups with a bottle of 'R' de, so she's missed the Dom already.

'I'll need a glass first. Unless, do you think he'd object if I relieved him of the bottle?'

Henry looks a little startled by the suggestion, but he seldom gets her jokes. Buzzy watches him diffidently make his way across the room. Before he can reach Afua and the Brazilian artist, however, Marcel is there, his arm discreetly placed around Afua's waist.

Not quite a Romeo, Buzzy thinks of the now retreating artist, to distract herself from a familiar spasm of jealousy. She turns away, almost spilling Asian crab cakes over the wife of a *Times Literary Supplement* editor, a barrel-shaped woman who falls into a desperate lament about the stupidity of her children, which she wouldn't mind but it's so *expensive*, what with the cost of good private tutors. At first, Buzzy wonders if the woman is under the mistaken impression that they know each other, before deciding she is simply tired and drunk and beyond caring who is listening.

'. . . and then to cap it all off,' she is saying, 'we lost Will for the whole summer because some Russian oligarch wanted an Oxford graduate to discuss world politics with. Can you imagine? He whisked him off to Ibiza in a private plane!'

'Come with me.' A Gallic voice, so soft in her ear that at first Buzzy is not sure she has not imagined it. With a quick apologetic shrug she abandons the editor's wife, who looks oddly crushed, but what does Buzzy know about being fat, or middle-aged? In the presence of Marcel, she cannot be expected to care.

Weaving their way through the crowd, Buzzy tries to tell him that she is without a drink and is not sure what she will do if she

doesn't find one soon. He seems not to have heard her as he heads for the French windows and terrace beyond. They pass Sherard, in conference with a craggy-faced man who looks like Samuel Beckett – or perhaps she only thinks that because of the literary milieu. Either way, she feels a momentary sense of pride to be among these worldly guests.

Buzzy can't tell how far exactly the garden extends beyond the torch-lit terrace, just that it's significantly larger than her parents' in Orpington. Marcel says there is a pond at the bottom and asks if she would like to have a look, though on arriving there's not much to see except a tarry pool smelling vaguely of fish pellets. He lights a joint and passes it to Buzzy. The smoke passes into her lungs as a smooth, almost imperceptible, heat: it's pure skunk, she realises, no tobacco has been used. This will shortly be bad news for her ability to hold a conversation, but right now, as Marcel asks *ça va bien?* and the air turns green and dances, everything does indeed feel fine.

The moment is ruined by someone called Gijs, who joins them by the pond and announces in short order that he works for an art hedge fund, has an uncanny ability to locate drugs at parties, and is an Arsenal fan. 'Anyone know the score this afternoon, by the way?'

Marcel tells him that they beat Blackburn Rovers 4–0, with Adebayor scoring a hat-trick. Buzzy is surprised: she has never known him to take an interest in football. Of the figure-of-eight-shaped pond, Gijs smirkingly tells them the previous owners were 'fairies' and Sherard had the phallus section removed when he bought the house.

'You must come across a lot of "fairies" in your line of work,' she replies, getting the stress wrong so the embarrassing silence seems to belong to her remark, not his. Gijs shows no sign of going anywhere, and Buzzy is about to give up and leave – if she delays greeting Afua any longer she will cause serious offence – when Marcel asks, 'Did you say you wanted a drink? *Tiens*, I have this for you.' He holds out a 33cl bottle of beer, the label indiscernible in the darkness. Since Buzzy is now trembling from insecurity and

genuinely in need of liquid, she takes the beer gratefully. 'Thanks. Where did you get this?'

Marcel shrugs. 'I found it. But wait, let me take the lid.'

Retrieving the bottle, he puts it to his mouth. She glimpses an incisor as he bites down on the metal bottle top, which falls to the ground with a soft hiss.

'Nice trick.' The light from Gijs' BlackBerry makes his cheeks glow. 'Bollocks! Chelski nailed Man Shitty 3–1.'

Sherard is scowling at Buzzy when she re-enters the sitting room. Really, it's too much: why invite her, or at least permit Henry and Afua to do so, if he is going to treat her so rudely? Is it her fault her father works in a furniture shop? Surely not everyone can be a dialectical materialist.

She raises her bottle to Sherard, thinking how funny it is that 'progressives' cannot handle the sight of a girl drinking beer. The noise of surrounding conversations hits her in waves – as expected, she is now very stoned. She makes a beeline for Afua, who has not moved from her spot by the wall but is receiving a procession of gentlemen callers, the latest a reedy American fashion writer. Henry is not far away, listening intently to the story of someone's recent charity climb of Mount Kilimanjaro.

'There you are! Douglas, this is Buzzy,' says Afua, firmly grasping her arm, from which Buzzy understands her friend is a little tipsy. This is confirmed when Afua strokes her hair and says, 'We're twins, can't you tell?'

Douglas stares at them both in dull panic, unsure if this is a private joke or some sort of test. 'Oh, why's that?'

'Well, *obviously*, we have the same hair. Look,' – she flicks playfully at Buzzy's locks – 'frizzy.' Except Afua's black hair is straightened, so that with her caramel skin and angular features she might at first glance pass for Andalusian or Cherokee.

'I prefer to think of it as curly.'

'Slumming it in South America hasn't cured you of your vanity, I see,' Afua teases. 'I take it you're enjoying the party, since you've been ignoring me so long?'

'It's fine. I just hope the crab cakes aren't poisoned or there'll be nothing in the *Guardian* for a few days.' Douglas looks mildly offended, but Buzzy is too filled with righteous anger at Sherard to mind. 'Love the house though. I didn't realise the *Liberal Review* was so profitable. I thought I read somewhere it was haemorrhaging readers.'

'Darling, so naive. Sherard doesn't have the magazine to make money.'

'Oh my God,' Douglas says, 'I read – is this true? – that Sherard commissioned Chris Ofili to produce a brick of elephant dung inscribed with some colourful insult – literally, it was written in red glitter paint – and sent it to that guy who writes for the *Independent*. Bruce Henderson, I want to say?'

'The inscription was *Eat this, you shit*. And he actually sent it to Simon—'

Afua has abruptly stopped speaking. She is staring at Buzzy with a curious fixity. Despite her slender frame, she has an aura that is resolute, if not intimidating. 'Where did you get that bottle?'

It's only then Buzzy notices that although the label on the neck of her beer says *Beck's*, the main sticker underneath is not the usual logo, but an arrangement of coloured dots. Very much, in fact, like the one famously associated with Damien Hirst. Her immediate thought is that this is typical of Sherard Howe; he can't just have an ordinary *Beck's*, it has to be some ridiculous personalised—

She watches Marcel return through the French windows. Daphne, Sherard's famous wife, is placing a hand on each of his shoulders before kissing him. As he dutifully offers a cheek, Buzzy meets his gaze. Worry that she might be hallucinating the entire scene is replaced by a thrilling fear that she might not be.

'I found it on the mantelpiece.'

'Okaay, it's just that Sherard usually keeps that bottle hidden away. He bought it at an auction. It's a special edition – Damien Hirst, obviously.'

'How much did it cost?'

‘A few hundred pounds, I suppose.’

Douglas gasps. From the corner of her eye, Buzzy is aware of Sherard making rapid progress in her direction.

‘Perhaps you should leave, darling,’ says Afua, in a voice quite unflecked by panic.