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They Are Trying to Break Your Heart

Written by David Savill

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They are Trying to Break Your Heart

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For Penny, Oren and Robin

‘Losing too is still ours’

Rainer Maria Rilke, ‘For Hans Carossa’

29 October 2004

London

Anya walked out of the lift to find the wrong picture on the corridor wall and a pot plant out of place. The lift had gone up, not down, and from here, the quickest way out of the building was onto the roof. At the top of the fire escape she barged through the smokers' exit and marched across the peeling bitumen, stopping only when she came to the rails. Over Exmouth Market, the pigeons were scrapping on the scaffolded tower of Our Most Holy Redeemer.

William had called the office. He had called her actual phone. Three years. And now he says, 'Hello you, what have you been up to?' Pleasantries. Questions about her work, and 'How have you been?' And 'Are you still living on Church Street?' And the way she played along – the way she tried to vaguely impress him by mentioning her new place in Walthamstow, her interest-only mortgage, her very slight promotion, whom she saw from the old days – the fact she even answered his questions annoyed her more than the questions themselves. They had been chatting about Bethany fucking Aldridge's bloody pregnancy. (No, the husband wasn't

a guy William knew. Yes, Anya had been to the wedding.) Anya had always found it easy to talk to William. And perhaps that was the problem.

She smelt the smoke before she saw the man sitting by the air-conditioning unit and realised she had been muttering under her breath. Not a Dignity Monitor man (he was clearly over fifty for a start), more likely one of the chartered surveyors from the fourth floor. She loosened her grip on the rail and not knowing what to do with her hands, tried to affect a casual posture by putting them into the pockets of her jeans. She was someone who came up here to take in the view, that was all.

'Smoke?' The man held out the packet as Anya headed for the roof door.

'There is nothing I would like more than to smoke a cigarette,' she told him.

'Oh, dear. I shouldn't tempt you, then.'

'Let's say it's been one of those days.'

'Always is,' the man said.

'Thank you anyway,' Anya said, then as she closed the door, 'you never know, tomorrow might be better!'

But today was not. She tried to pay attention to a young solicitor from one of the new agencies scooping up asylum cases. The woman had come to tell Anya the story of her Serbian client. What the solicitor really wanted was a human rights researcher to act as an expert witness. But Anya needed to see if the story added up first, and the solicitor clearly hadn't done this before. For a start, she had come without the client. The client was a man from Serbia, claiming a threat to life in the form of homophobic bullying. He came from the village of Gornja Slatnik, but when Anya pointed out there were at least two Gornja Slatniks in Serbia, it was news to the woman. In telling the story, the solicitor kept referring to 1998, but when Anya looked at the affidavit, the client had written 1996. They

tried to call the client but he wasn't answering, and the difficulty of matching any information held by Dignity Monitor concerning the times and places in contention made Anya late for her regional-desk meeting with the programme director. Last through the door, she had to perch on a filing cabinet next to the old television, facing the backs at the table as Rhidian Keller talked about the effects of the Kosovan riots on regional funding and the need to redistribute further funds for election-monitoring activities in Moldova. She tried to follow, but the woman sitting in front of her was texting someone who wanted to know whether to pick up cereal at the supermarket, and for some reason this was a more compelling drama.

Yes, we are out.

The Shreddies, or the Cheerios?

Shreddies. NO MORE CHEERIOS.

Kids?

TOO MUCH SUGAR!

William had once tried to drown Anya's mobile phone in a river. In Brecon. A rare moment of anger. But he had chucked it over a stream so small it landed on the other bank and Anya had been able to cross over the stepping stones to retrieve it. The cracked screen was something she had come to regard with some affection.

'Can we work with that, Anya Teal?'

It was Rhidian.

'Sorry?'

Her seated colleagues had all turned their heads and were looking up at her with the eyes of people anxious for a meeting to end.

‘The Kosovan riot report?’ Rhidian said.

‘Yes—’

Anya intended to start a question, but Rhidian took it as confirmation and carried on.

‘Good. So, unfortunately,’ he said, ‘we haven’t yet got the green light to pick up on the Kosovan returnees’ project.’

Anya stopped smiling. She had come to the meeting to challenge this very point. The returnees’ project was hers. But before she could gather her thoughts, someone was talking about the new liaison for the Council of Europe and she had to wait until the meeting was over before she could catch up with Rhidian in the empty room.

‘Would it help if I wrote a paper?’ she started.

‘The report on returnees?’

‘I think the time to finish this is now.’

‘Can you complete it from here?’

‘I can’t get the same buy-in from here.’

He turned from his laptop screen. ‘We’ve had Abu Ghraib, the report on the riots – financially, I just can’t get them to prioritise the returnees. Maybe if you do it from your desk, but another field investigation – I don’t think so.’

It was no use making the argument alone. She should have caught him during the meeting and co-opted the other members of the team. Now, her arguments had the tired sound of lines well rehearsed; it wasn’t always right to divert funds for emergencies, the bigger picture was more important, once committed their reputation might be damaged if they then scaled back on the report, or did it half-arsed. But Rhidian could nod in sympathy all day, the programme director was just a messenger when it came to money. It was the divisional director she needed to talk to.

Anya stood up. ‘Well, I might just have to take a holiday in Pristina.’

‘Anya, the way you work, you should take a holiday in the Bahamas, on a beach.’

‘And have my nails buffed by Haitian migrants who get beaten up in detention cells?’

Good old Anya, Rhidian’s smile said, Anya will pick up the pieces.

‘And the riot report,’ he added as she left. ‘You’ll add something to it? About Svinjare?’

Dignity Monitor had told Anya to leave Kosovo when the March riots began. On the phone from London a man from the emergencies team asked if she could recommend a fixer. Not only were they taking over, they also wanted her staff. But now, as the report was prepared for Legal and due to be published, they needed her. When she saw the draft it was clear why.

The draft lacked testimony from the first day of the riots. Anya was essential precisely because she hadn’t left the country like a good girl, but asked her fixer to drive straight to Svinjare. On the radio there had been news of Albanians burning down Serbian houses.

What was it they were saying in the report’s introduction? Numbers: 2 days, 550 homes burned, along with 27 churches and monasteries; 4,100 people displaced. From the UN Secretary-General to the head of NATO, around the diplomatic table it had been decided: ‘organised extremists’ were to blame. When you had fucked up as badly as the United Nations Mission in Kosovo, it was better to paint the enemy as organised.

But it wasn’t organised. This was the point the report needed to make. The Albanian rioters had been stoked for months. They were reacting to the lousy way in which the

UN were running things. The UN's Kosovo forces could do nothing about it because they lacked any coherent policy. Anya had seen it herself. She had stood at the roadblock in Svinjare, 500 metres from a French military camp where hundreds of vehicles were still lined up in perfect military order and going nowhere. She had watched as the rioters walked straight past a handful of KFOR troops and the single UN civilian-police car that had troubled to turn up.

She returned from the water fountain in the office. The water was always too cold and it numbed her teeth.

In the village of Svinjare, she typed at her desk, Albanian boys were seen torturing the livestock of Serbian villagers.

Then she deleted the sentence. There was no room in the report for what she had seen behind the burning barn, for the boys who stood with flaming torches, lighting a pig hung from scaffolding and doused in petrol. The suffering of an animal didn't add anything to the main argument here. The problem in Svinjare was that the French in KFOR saw their role as the protection of people, not property. And so all the UN troops had done was bus the Serbs of the village to the sports hall of Camp Belvedere, leaving the rioters to do as they liked. By early evening, the base had registered 206 of the villagers, and Anya's notes were filled with their voices.

Finding the one that needed to be heard, she added it to the report first:

'If I had a euro for every international who has come around here and observed what is happening. For every foreign soldier who has walked through my village and done nothing. All this "help" that doesn't help. All these cars, and these helicopters, and all this money, and still they can walk into our village and burn our homes, when the whole lot – the

whole lot of you who are supposed to bring “peace” and “security” – you are sitting here doing nothing. Worse than nothing – you’re getting rid of us, and helping them, helping them, take what they want . . . If I had a euro for that!’

It was a voice loud enough for one moment to drown Will’s out. When the office intern appeared at her shoulder, and like a schoolboy asked permission to go home, Anya found herself saying:

‘Do you feel like getting drunk?’

If she was going to have a bad day, she might as well have a bad night. She didn’t really mean to get drunk, but somehow they hadn’t eaten. At one point in the evening Jack had suggested a restaurant, but she couldn’t imagine the slow business of ordering food. He introduced her to a craft beer called Bruised Moon, and she introduced him to gin. Anya felt aged by his references. She didn’t know the films and books he was talking about. He didn’t know who Winona Ryder was and had never even heard of *Heathers*.

The howling carriages of the Victoria line transported them from Highbury and Islington to Walthamstow in an instant – walk in, bright lights, walk off. She couldn’t remember stumbling down the cut, or along the terrace. They had been laughing about something to do with hipster hair, then as soon as the door of her house opened, she felt as if she were falling into the dark silence of a stranger’s. When she found the light switch, her living room appeared to her like something that had been washed too many times.

When the door closed behind them, she was standing in her home with a boy about whom she knew practically nothing.

'I like it when they knock the rooms through like this,' he said, 'kitchen to lounge.'

She struggled to keep things from getting away. Kettle, tap, running water.

'Yes.'

'You have this whole place to yourself?' His voice seemed closer now. 'How many bedrooms is this? Three?'

She turned off the tap and closed her eyes. She wanted his breath on her neck and his hand on her belly. She wanted his fingers extended around her waist to make her feel small. But when she turned around to meet his face, Jack wasn't close to her at all. Never had been. He was as far away as possible, standing on the other side of the sofa and picking up a picture from the mantelpiece.

'Where's this?'

Anya put down the kettle and tried to walk around the objects of her house with grace. He was looking at the picture of the Roma girls in Stovnik. She took off her glasses so things didn't seem too real.

'It's from a field trip to Bosnia.'

'And you're working on Kosovo now?'

She didn't hear what he said next. She pressed her nose into his arm, felt his hands make a gift of her head, his lips brushing down her face, rough over her mouth.

'Wait there.' Anya took the picture out of his hand and put it back on the mantel.

Alone in her bedroom, she pulled off her jeans and threw them into a pile of dirty laundry in the corner. The underwear drawer offered a large pile of black knickers. She used to own something spotty – pale, blue spots – but at the bottom of the drawer she found only the straps of a suspender belt. Where

was it? It was William who had bought the spotty set. There had even been a chemise baby-doll thing at one point. In the sock drawer, she found a pair of canary-yellow knickers which would have to do, but when she hoicked them on and pulled up her jeans, the knickers felt a little small. There was no full-length mirror, so she had to angle the spot-squeezing mirror on her chest of drawers just to look at herself.

Her glasses. They were downstairs – in the mirror, only the vague shape of a woman.

The shape slumped back onto the bed. She wasn't going to fuck the intern. Who was she kidding? Three years. Will had not called in three years, and now he wanted to talk as if nothing had changed; as if all that silence was OK, as if it meant nothing at all. They should 'catch up', Will said. She should come over at Christmas. He would show her Thailand. *Thailand*. And what she had wanted to say, what she had wanted to scream from the roof, came out now in a sad dribble. 'Fuck you,' Anya mumbled into the cradle of her hands. Fuck Will. Not the intern. She couldn't fuck the intern because Will had ruined that too. He had called from halfway around the world, reached into her life and swept it all away. And she couldn't fuck the intern, because the intern would be there in the office on Monday morning.

Will had talked as if nothing had changed. And he was right. They had been together thirteen years, and for that reason alone they would always be together in some way, and even the 'other side of the world' wasn't really the other side of the world any more. It was nine hours away and—

'Hi.'

She looked up. An attractive man, still young enough to look good in jeans, was standing at the door of her room.

'Is this like – the third bedroom?'

'Two here. And there's a loft conversion.'

Jack crossed the threshold and surveyed the room like a bad actor lost on the stage. 'It's so big. You could rent out the rooms.'

She could. She could rent out the spare rooms of this house – this house built for the ideal nuclear family she had not yet managed to produce. 'I'm looking for lodgers,' Anya said. But the truth was, she hadn't even advertised.

He looked at her dirty laundry and unmade bed. 'I'm going to have to say that I think this is probably not a good idea, professionally and everything.'

What was he? All of twenty years old? 'Professionally?' Anya regained herself.

He looked confused. 'Well, you didn't come back down,' he said. 'And I thought—'

'No, you're right of course. Too much to drink. Not a good idea. There's a bed made up in the room next door.'

'Right.' Jack looked crestfallen. 'Well, I mean if you still want to—'

'That's romantic!'

He held up his hands in surrender. 'I mean, whatever you want—'

Anya patted the bed. He did as he was told. Placing her hand on a thigh that was mannequin hard, she touched the stiff cotton of his jeans and walked her fingers up to the zip.

'Is it true,' he said, 'that you chased off some rioters in Kosovo? I heard you threw stones at them and told them their mothers would be ashamed? Something about a pig?'

Anya pushed Jack back onto the bed, and climbing on top of him, placed her hand over his mouth. 'For fuck's sake,' she said, 'shut up.'

‘It is estimated 40,000 persons went missing as a consequence of the armed conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, of which around 30,000 are from Bosnia and Herzegovina. Some 14,000 people remain unaccounted for. Of these, more than 10,500 are linked to the conflict in Bosnia, 2,400 to the conflict in Croatia, and some 1,800 to the conflict in Kosovo.’

Amnesty International, ‘The Right to Know’ (2012)