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Opening Extract from...

blueeyedboy

Written by Joanne Harris

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blueeyedboy

JOANNE HARRIS



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and what i want to know is
how do you like your blueeyed boy
Mister Death

e e cummings, 'Buffalo Bill'

Part One

blue

Once there was a widow with three sons, and their names were Black, Brown and Blue. Black was the eldest, moody and aggressive. Brown was the middle child, timid and dull. But Blue was his mother's favourite. And he was a murderer.

1

You are viewing the webjournal of **blueeyedboy** *posting on:*
badguysrock@webjournal.com
Posted at: *02.56 on Monday, January 28*
Status: *public*
Mood: *nostalgic*
Listening to: *Captain Beefheart:* 'Ice Cream For Crow'

The colour of murder is blue, he thinks. Ice-blue, smokescreen blue, frostbite, post-mortem, body-bag blue. It is also *his* colour in so many ways, running through his circuitry like an electrical charge, screaming blue murder all the way.

Blue colours everything. He sees it, senses it everywhere, from the blue of his computer screen to the blue of the veins on the backs of her hands, raised now and twisted like the tracks of sandworms on Blackpool beach – where they used to go, the four of them, every year on his birthday, and he would have an ice-cream cone, and paddle in the sea, and search out the little scuttling crabs from under the piles of seaweed, and drop them into his bucket to die in the heat of the simmering birthday sun.

Today he is only four years old, and there is a peculiar innocence in the way he carries out these small and guiltless slayings. There is no malice in the act, merely a keen curiosity for the scuttling thing that tries to escape, sidling round and round the base of the blue plastic bucket; then, hours later, giving up the fight, claws splayed, and turning its vivid underbelly upwards in a futile show of surrender, by

which time he has long since lost interest and is eating a coffee ice cream (a sophisticated choice for such a little boy, but vanilla has never been his taste), so that when he rediscovers it at the end of the day, when the time comes to empty his bucket and to go home, he is vaguely surprised to find the creature dead, and wonders, indeed, how such a thing could ever have been alive at all.

His mother finds him wide-eyed on the sand, poking the dead thing with a fingertip. Her main concern is not for the fact that her son is a killer, but for the fact that he is suggestible, and that many things upset him in a way that she does not understand.

'Don't play with that,' she tells him. 'It's nasty. Come away from there.'

'Why?' he says.

Good question. The creatures in the bucket have been standing undisturbed all day. He gives it some thought. 'They're dead,' he concludes. 'I collected them all, and now they're dead.'

His mother scoops him into her arms. This is precisely what she dreads. Some kind of outburst: tears, perhaps; something that will make the other mothers look down their noses at her and sneer.

She comforts him. 'It's not your fault. It was just an accident. Not your fault.'

An accident, he thinks to himself. Already, he knows that this is a lie. There was no accident, it *was* his fault, and the fact that his mother denies this confuses him more than her shrill voice and the feverish way she clasps him in her arms, smearing his T-shirt with suntan oil. He pulls away – he hates mess – and she fixes him with a fretful gaze, wondering if he is going to cry.

He wonders whether perhaps he should. Maybe she expects it of him. But he can sense how very anxious she is, how hard she tries to protect him from pain. And the scent of his ma's distress is like the coconut of her suntan oil mixed with the taste of tropical fruit, and suddenly it hits him – *Dead! Dead!* – and he really does begin to cry.

And so she kicks sand over the rest of his catch – a snail, a shrimp, a baby flatfish all landed and gasping, with its little mouth pulled down in a tragic crescent – smiling and singing; *Whoops! All gone!* – trying to make a game of it, holding him tightly as she does, so that

no possible taint of guilt may darken the gaze of her blue-eyed boy.

He is so sensitive, she thinks. So startlingly imaginative. His brothers are another race, with their scabbed knees and their uncombed hair and their wrestling matches on the beds. His brothers do not need her protection. They have each other. They have their friends. They like vanilla ice cream, and when they play at cowboys (two fingers cocked to make a gun) they always wear the white hats, and make the bad guys pay.

But he has always been different. Curious. Impressionable. *You think too much*, she tells him sometimes, with the look of a woman too much in love to admit to any real fault in the object of her devotion. He can already see how she worships him, wants to protect him from everything, from every shadow that may pass across the blue skies of his life, from every possible injury, even the ones he inflicts on himself.

For a mother's love is uncritical, selfless and self-sacrificing; a mother's love can forgive anything: tantrums, tears, indifference, ingratitude or cruelty. A mother's love is a black hole that swallows every criticism, absolves all blame, excuses blasphemy, theft and lies, transmuting even the vilest deed into something that is not his fault –

Whoops! All gone!

Even murder.

Post comment:

Captainbunnykiller: *LOL, dude. You rock!*

ClairDeLune: *This is wonderful,* **blueeyedboy**. *I think you ought to write more fully about your relationship with your mother and the way it has affected you. I don't believe that anyone is born bad. We simply make bad choices, that's all. I look forward to reading the next chapter!*

JennyTricks: *(post deleted).*

JennyTricks: *(post deleted).*

JennyTricks: *(post deleted).*

blueeyedboy: *Why, thank you . . .*

2

You are viewing the webjournal of **blueeyedboy**.
Posted at: *17.39 on Monday, January 28*
Status: *restricted*
Mood: *virtuous*
Listening to: *Dire Straits*: 'Brothers In Arms'

My brother had been dead for less than a minute by the time the news reached my WeJay. That's about how long it takes: six or seven seconds to film the scene on a mobile phone camera; forty-five to upload the footage on to YouTube; ten to Twitter to all your friends – 13:06 OMG! *Just saw a terrible car crash* – and after that the caravan of messages to my WebJournal; the texts; the e-mails, the oh-my-Gods.

Well, you can skip the condolences. Nigel and I hated each other from the day we were born, he and I, and nothing he has ever done – including giving up the ghost – has caused any change to my feelings. But he *was* my brother, after all. Give me credit for some delicacy. And Ma must be feeling upset, of course, even though he wasn't her favourite. Once a mother of three, today only one of her children remains. Yours truly, *blueeyedboy*, now so nearly alone in the world –

The police took their time, as usual. Forty minutes, door-to-door. Ma was downstairs, making lunch: lamb chops and mash, with pie for dessert. For months I'd hardly eaten; suddenly now I was ravenous. Perhaps it takes the death of a sibling to really give me an appetite.

From my room, I followed the scene: the police car; the doorbell; the voices; the scream. The sound of something in the hallway recess

– the telephone table, at a guess – slamming against the wall as she fell, cradled between two officers, clutching the air with her outstretched hands, and then the smell of burning fat, probably the chops she left under the grill when she went to answer the door –

That was my cue. Time to log off. Time to face the music. I wondered whether I could get away with leaving in one of my iPod plugs. Ma's so used to seeing me wearing them that she might not even have noticed; but the two officers were a different matter, of course, and the last thing I wanted at such a time was for someone to find me insensitive –

'Oh, B.B., the most *terrible* thing—'

My mother's a bit of a drama queen. Contorted face, eyes wide, mouth wider, she looked like a mask of Medusa. Holding out her arms to me as if to pull me under, fingers clawing at my back, wailing into my right ear – defenceless now without my iPod – and shedding tears of blue mascara down the collar of my shirt.

'Ma, please.' I hate mess.

The female officer (there's always one) took over the business of comforting her. Her partner, an older man, looked at me with weary patience, and said:

'Mr Winter, there's been an accident.'

'Nigel?' I said.

'I'm afraid so.'

I counted the seconds in my head, whilst mentally replaying Mark Knopfler's guitar intro to 'Brothers In Arms'. I knew I was under scrutiny; I couldn't afford to get this wrong. But music makes things easier, reducing inappropriate emotional responses and allowing me to function, if not entirely normally, then at least as others expect of me.

'I knew it, somehow,' I said at last. 'I had the weirdest feeling.'

He nodded, as if he knew what I meant. Ma continued to rant and rail. *Overdoing it, Ma*, I thought; it wasn't as if they were especially close. Nigel was a ticking bomb; it had to happen sooner or later. And car accidents are so common these days, so tragically unavoidable. A patch of ice, a busy road; almost the perfect crime, you might say, almost above suspicion. I wondered if I ought to cry, but decided to keep it simple. So I sat down – rather shakily – and put my head in my

hands. It hurt. I've always been prone to headaches, especially in moments of stress. *Pretend it's just fiction, blueeyedboy. An entry in your WeJay.*

Once more I sought the comfort of my imaginary playlist, where the drums had just come in, ticking gentle counterpoint to a guitar riff that sounds almost lazily effortless. It isn't effortless, of course. Nothing so precise ever is. But Knopfler has curiously spatulate, elongated fingers. Born for the instrument, you might almost say, destined from birth for that fretboard, those strings. If he had been born with different hands, would he have ever picked up a guitar? Or would he have tried it anyway, knowing he'd always be second-rate?

'Was my son alone in the car?'

'Ma'am?' said the older officer.

'Wasn't there – a girl – with him?' said Ma, with the special contempt she always reserves for any discussion of Nigel's girl.

The officer shook his head. 'No, ma'am.'

Ma dug her fingers into my arm. 'He never used to be careless,' she said. 'My son was an excellent driver.'

Well, that just shows how little she knows. Nigel brought to his driving the same temperance and subtlety that he did to his relationships. I should know; I still have the marks. But now he's dead, he's a paragon. That hardly seems fair, does it now, after all I've done for her?

'I'll make you a cup of tea, Ma.' Anything to get out of here. I made for the kitchen, only to find the officer obstructing my way.

'I'm afraid we're going to need you to come with us to the station, sir.'

My mouth was suddenly very dry. 'The station?' I said.

'Formalities, sir.'

For a moment I saw myself under arrest, leaving the house in handcuffs. Ma in tears; the neighbours in shock; myself in an orange jumpsuit (really, *not* my colour); locked up in a room without windows. In fic I'd make a run for it: knock out the officer, steal his car and be over the border before the police could circulate my description. In life –

'What kind of formalities?'

'We'll need you to ID the body, sir.'

'Oh. That.'
'I'm sorry, sir.'

Ma made me do it, of course. Waited outside while I put a name to what was left of Nigel. I tried to make it fictional, to see it all as a film set; but even so, I passed out. They took me home in an ambulance. Still, it was worth it. To have him dead; to be free of the bastard for ever –

All this is fic, you understand. I never murdered anyone. I know they tell you to *write what you know*, as if you could ever write what you know, as if *knowing* were the essential thing, when the most essential thing is desire. But wishing that my brother were dead is not the same as committing a crime. It's not my fault if the universe follows my WebJournal. And so life goes on – for most of us – much the same as it ever did, and *blueeyedboy* sleeps the sleep of the just – if not *quite* that of the innocent.

3

You are viewing the webjournal of **blueeyedboy**.
Posted at: *18.04 on Monday, January 28*
Status: *restricted*
Mood: *blah*
Listening to: *Del Amitri*: 'Nothing Ever Happens'

That was just two days ago. Already we're back to normal, apart from planning the funeral. Back to our comfort rituals, our little everyday routines. With Ma, it's dusting the china dogs. With me, of course, it's the Internet: my WeJay, my playlists, my murders.

Internet. An interesting word. Like something brought up from the deep. A net for something that has been interred, or something as yet to be interred; a holding-place for all the things we'd rather keep secret in our real lives. And yet, we like to watch, don't we? Through a glass, darkly, we watch the world turn: a world peopled with shades and reflections, never more than a mouse-click away. A man kills himself – live, on cam. It's disgusting, but strangely compulsive. We wonder if it was a fake. It could be a fake; anything could. But everything looks so much more real when you're watching it on a computer screen. Thus even the things we see every day – perhaps *especially* those things – gain an extra significance when glimpsed through the eye of a camera.

That girl, for instance. The girl in the bright-red duffel coat who walks past my house nearly every day, windswept and oblivious to the camera's eye that watches her. She has her habits, as do I. She knows

the power of desire. She knows that the world turns not on love, or even money, but on *obsession*.

Obsession? Of course. We are all obsessed. Obsessed with TV; with the size of our dicks; with money and fame and the love-lives of others. This virtual – though far from virtuous – world is a reeking midden of mind-trash, mish-mash, slash; car dealerships and Viagra sales, and music and games and gossip and lies and tiny personal tragedies lost in transit down the line, waiting for someone to care, just once, waiting for someone to connect –

That's where WeJay comes in. WebJournal, the site for all seasonings. Restricted entries for private enjoyment; public – well, for everyone else. On WeJay I can vent as I please, confess without fear of censure; be myself – or indeed, someone else – in a world where no one is quite what they seem, and where every member of every tribe is free to do what they most desire.

Tribe? Yes, everyone here has a tribe; each with its divisions and subdivisions, binary veins and capillaries branching out into a near-infinity of permutations as they distance themselves from the mainstream. The rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate, the pervert with his webcam. No one has to hunt alone, however far from the pack they have strayed. Everyone has a home here, a place where someone will take them in, where all their tastes are catered for –

Most people go with the popular choice. They choose vanilla every time. Vanillas are the good guys, common as Coca-Cola. Their conscience is as white as their perfect teeth; they are tall and bronzed and presentable; they eat at McDonald's; they take out the trash; they come with a PG certificate and they'd never shoot a man in the back.

But bad guys come in a million flavours. Bad guys lie; bad guys cheat; bad guys make the heart beat faster – or sometimes come to a sudden stop. Which is why I created *badguysrock*: originally a WeJay community devoted to villains throughout the fictional universe; now a forum for bad guys to celebrate beyond the reach of the ethics police; to glory in their crimes; to strut; to wear their villainy with pride.

Membership is open right now; the price of admission a single post – be it a fic, an essay or just a drabble. Though if there's something

you'd like to confess, this is just the place for it: no names, no rules, no colours – but one.

No, *not* black, as you might expect. Black is far too limiting. Black presupposes a lack of depth. But blue is creative, melancholy. Blue is the music of the soul. And blue is the colour of our clan, embracing all shades of villainy, all flavours of unholy desire.

So far, it's a small clan, with less than a dozen regulars.

First comes *Captainbunnykiller*: Andy Scott of New York. Cap's blog is a mixture of jackass humour, pornographic fantasy and furious invective – against niggers, queers, fucktards, the fat, Christians and, most recently, the French – but I doubt he's ever killed anything.

Next comes *chrysalisbaby*. Aka Chryssie Bateman, of California. This one's a typical Body Freak – has been on a diet since she was twelve, and now weighs over three hundred pounds. Has a history of falling for vicious men. Never learns. Never will.

After that there's *ClairDeLune*; Clair Mitchell, to her friends. This one's a local; she teaches a course on creative self-expression at Malbry College (which explains her slightly superior tone and her addiction to literary psychobabble) and runs an online writers' group as well as a sizeable fansite devoted to a certain middle-aged character actor – let us call him Angel Blue – with whom she is infatuated. Angel is an irregular choice, an actor specializing in louche individuals, damaged types, serial killers, and other assorted bad-guy roles. Not A-list, but you'd know his face. She often posts pictures of him on here. Curiously enough, he looks something like me.

Then there's *Toxic69*, aka Stuart Dawson, of Leeds. Left crippled in a motorbike crash, he spends his angry life online, where no one needs to pity him; and *Purepwnage9*, of Fife, who lives for Warcraft and Second Life, oblivious of the fact that his own life is surely but swiftly slipping away; plus any number of lurkers and irregulars – *JennyTricks*; *BombNumber20*, *Jesusismycopilot*, and so on, who exhibit a diverting range of responses to our various entries, from admiration to outrage; from cheeriness to profanity.

And then, of course, there's *Albertine*. Definitely not like the rest, there's a confessional tone to her entries that I find more than a little promising, a hint of danger, a dark undertone, a style perhaps more

akin to my own. And she lives right here in the Village, no more than a dozen streets away –

Coincidence?

Not quite. Of course, I have been watching her. Especially so since my brother's death. Not with malice, but with curiosity, even a measure of envy. She seems so self-possessed. So calm. So safely cocooned in her little world, so unaware of what's happening. Her online posts are so intimate, so naked and so oddly naïve that you'd never believe she was one of us, a bad guy among bad guys. Her fingers on the piano keys danced like little dervishes. I remember that, and her gentle voice, and her name, which smelt of roses.

The poet Rilke was killed by a rose. How very *Sturm und Drang* of him. A scratch with a thorn that got infected; a poison gift that keeps on giving. Personally, I don't see the appeal. I feel more kinship with the orchid tribe: subversives of the plant world, clinging to life wherever they can, subtle and insidious. Roses are so commonplace, with their whorls of sickening bubblegum pink; their scheming scent; their unwholesome leaves, their sly little thorns that poke at the heart –

O rose, thou art sick –

Still, aren't we all?