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The Humorist

Written by Russell Kane

Published by Simon & Schuster

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THE HUMORIST

RUSSELL KANE



SIMON &
SCHUSTER

London · New York · Sydney · Toronto · New Delhi

A CBS COMPANY

First published in Great Britain in 2012 by Simon & Schuster UK Ltd
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1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Simon & Schuster UK Ltd
1st Floor
222 Gray's Inn Road
London
WC1X 8HB

www.simonandschuster.co.uk

Simon & Schuster Australia, Sydney
Simon & Schuster India, New Delhi

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

Hardback ISBN 978-0-85720-923-8
Trade Paperback ISBN 978-0-85720-924-5

Typeset by M Rules
Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

To my various Queens:

My mother, my Great Aunt Eileen,
the poet Maggie Butt, the novelist Sue Gee

Long may they reign

The beauty of the world, which is so soon to perish, has two edges, one of laughter, one of anguish, cutting the heart asunder.

Virginia Woolf

1

The Punchline, 2003

In the Comedy Store, Leicester Square, London, lay three hundred and twelve people in various poses of death, none of which were natural. By the cigarette machine I could make out a man dressed as a nurse, frozen on all fours, tongue swollen in silent mouth. Near the Ladies, the crumpled form of Review journalist Miranda Love, legs buckled, eyes bulging and popped.

Some of the deceased had fallen like 1980s zombie creatures, forearms prematurely rigored, drawn into their chests, hands splayed, tendrilled fingers stretched in stiff sprigs. Others had limbs and appendages pointing downwards, backs arched, as though on swimming-pool chutes. A few had faces tucked into their own armpits, dead-bird heads, coy in death – flirting. But all of them, every one of

those three hundred and twelve stiff lifeless forms, had a curious thing in common: tears rolled down their cheeks. Thirty-seven minutes post mortem, with faces cold and vacant, every cheek continued to wet.

I watched the first detective arrive. A corpulent middle-aged woman in pale cream trouser-suit. She spent her first few moments futilely fending off the stench, but a few lungfuls later she relented, delivering a compact heave of vomit into a crisp mauve hanky. Yes, I suppose as many as one hundred of the dead had defecated or vomited on the way through it. Steadying herself against a brass handrail the detective clambered into the light-box, as though systematic exploration was a viable way of understanding something this – unusual. Two pallid-faced men came to her aid as she searched in vain for the controls. They were anxious to stop the lurid halogens strobing across the polished black stage. Another officer busied himself with the knobs and dials on the sprawling sound desk in the imperious technical booth stage-left. But for all their frantic searching and fiddling the whole mess remained bathed in jocular purples and yellows for a good fifteen minutes. Cigarette smoke still eddied around lifeless flesh, the neon diffusing through stale vapour. But more than these ghoulish tableaux, the faecal stink, perhaps the worst thing – was the incessant music. At least I found this the most grating; that ridiculous upbeat ten-second soundtrack on loop, introducing an act who would

never appear onstage; a stage upon which lay the dead body of Matthew Hopton, compère to the Comedy Store for over fifteen years. His final act was to pitch forwards, turn inwards his head with spiked 1990s hair, exhale his last breath, weep, and die in a copious pool of his own urine.

This was what the first arrivals witnessed. I know, because I watched the whole thing. I looked on with a strong black coffee almost smiling: though of course smiling would have been impossible. I had waited amongst the casualties, crouching in the hallway with a face of terror; convincing shivers, and muddled looks – the comedy-reviewing journalist who just happened to have been in the soundproofed corridor.

In fact, only one seated audience member had survived: a thirtyish man, completely unharmed but dazed. What had saved him? A combination of two coincidental factors. He was foreign, spoke some sort of Baltic language, wasn't fluent in English; plus he had been looking away during the Simongan Choreographic Stride. Even staff manning the inner door, bouncers and ticket-office lady, all perished. The three chaps collecting stubs at the inner door – Barry, Jacob and Roberto, had simply heard the thing, and that was it for them. The fracas it caused meant the security staff had rushed into the club from their various posts to see what was happening onstage. Even Big Dave Wilson outside on Oxendon Street had gone, perhaps because of his radio feed? They found him in the road

in a seated position, eyes blank and milky, a puddle of liquidy faeces spreading away from him in symmetrical blossom.

Don't get me wrong: I am not trying to seem lurid about the loss of three hundred and twelve lives. My writing this is not some sort of *purge*, nor is it supposed to represent the maniacal inner laugh of an aroused madman. It's more I see what happened as a sort of necessary proof; just the punchline if you like. Think of the set-up. The long, long set-up. Years of academic coldness, then this: all of it out – out in one big spurt of mirth.

'Nothing at all?' asked the pleasant WPC. She had a gentle face, which seemed ill-suited to processing violence and darkness.

'Lindsay – can I call you Lindsay?' I asked.

She nodded. She could have been no older than twenty-five. A few chestnut hairs had escaped from beneath her pied-rimmed cap undermining any authority. Given the scale of destruction around us, the questioning felt remarkably calm. In fact, I felt more than just calm. Alive. Suddenly alive. I sipped at my coffee, easily batting back answers to unanswerable questions. I winked. Pointed. Each motion of my body seemed important, as though it deserved its own special type of respect – I mean from me, as much as from anyone else. I'd never looked upon myself as fully alive. As I followed her words, a strange liquid consciousness ran through me. For the first

time in nearly forty years I existed in the present tense, no yearning – just being. No blushing. Just a human being before me, and whatever I chose.

'Are you sure there's nothing more you can tell me?' she said.

I clenched my jaw, enjoying sensations of cockedness, primed readiness. I bubbled saliva – that thick white nervous type; licked my inner gums, savouring the firm contact of incisor upon incisor. I tensed my tongue.

'As I said, it's hard to recall what happened. It's hazy,' I said. 'In my line of work . . .'

'Line of work?'

'Comedy. I review.'

'OK.'

'In my line of work . . . I see comics die, but it's rare I'm in the middle of an actual genocide.' I had restarted a joke. Lamely. Also, the blend of distasteful death with my vocal flatness should have made it all supremely awkward, but I knew what I was doing and she laughed loudly, attracting reproachful glares from her colleagues.

'Quite,' she said, composing herself, renesting the strands of hair. 'Did you see anyone running out of the club?'

'No.'

'You were, you say, in the corridor?' She heaved as the pungent smell of human dung wafted past us.

'Yes.'

'But no one passed you?'

'No,' and I offered a shade of powerful Humour from my eyebrows.

She paused to uncrease an involuntary smile. 'Was there anyone else onstage when it happened?'

'I didn't see. I missed the whole thing. I was just on my way to check the car. That's when I heard a commotion.'

'A commotion?'

'Yes. I leant into the ticket booth to ask Jean what was happening . . . and that's when she just . . . sort of . . .'

'Sort of what?'

'Died.'

The cause of Jean's death, of all these deaths, cannot be quickly explained – perhaps cannot be explained at all. Why did I lie about who was onstage? What really did that have to do with anything? Maybe in the shock of it all I was trying to re-process the truth. Change it. I should have just told her the proud truth.

'Could you wait here, please.'

But she did not move off. She waited a while, staring at me. I had a confusing moment where I too saw 'me'. Benjamin White, the man who the Comedy Store had laughed at for sixty-one wonderful seconds. Benjamin White: detested critic turned successful comedian, if only for a one-night run. Five foot nine inches, dressed in jeans, even wearing the standard-issue bright Indie T-shirt so well sported by try-hard, 'trendy' London comics. Me: the man with the flat boxer's nose; too long overlooked, unenjoyed, underappreciated, undiscovered – underwhelmed

by life. Benjamin White: a soul born with the power to know, but cursed never to practise. And when I say 'know', I do not mean in the same sense as those morons in review sections, those half-baked Oxbridge Fleet Streeters, two of whom I know for a fact kept me at sub-editor level purely through personal vendetta. I mean I *saw* humour.

I had made every soul in the world's most prestigious venue laugh hard. Laugh until their beings folded outwards, came together, and transmuted into something more than human flesh could know. For one night only people arrived at *my* theatre.

The house-lights of the Comedy Store burst into white halogen. Things lost their abstracted garishness. The room took on a mundane, crime-scene reality. WPC Grebe continued speaking but I did not listen. Receiving an ominous gesture from a sergeant she moved off towards a fire exit, asking that I remain in the hallway. I watched them conferencing. I had, at most, minutes left.

Half-heartedly I swept the room for unmanned doors. Under the lights' clinical glare, the whole thing seemed graphic, excessive. My feelings of lightness, of power, slowed to a thick, heavy fear. This was always bound to happen, I told myself. I ran that Monty Python sketch through in my head. The one where Germans die in the trenches at the hands of a powerful English joke. Their skit is our modern rewrite of a perennially told myth. And on it goes, that story death by laughter; only here for me it stopped.

The sharp clacking of folding chairs and men's voices. No escape, no exit, but none was sought. A prey-like resignation coursed through me. By now six or seven officers were circling, their faces resolute. My final flutterings of fright rose until they resolved back into a dead feeling of doneness, of being finished; a mission fully accomplished; and soon many hands were upon me.

It was this rough treatment by the officers which dimmed negative sensations superfluous. As the doors of the Ford Mondeo slammed shut, only one thought lodged in my mind: How? How had I, Benjamin White, come to this?

And then I thought of my mother.

And then I thought of my birth.

Yes. This was the joke. Nothing else – but this.

2

The Set-up, 1964.

On Saturday, 30 May 1964, in a small private ward of the Charing Cross Hospital, a scrawny baby boy slid slowly from the body of Mrs Sally White. The tortuous birth went on for some hours, but at last a crushed, misshapen infant writhed before her, the sound of the boy's father assaulting his ears.

'Boy, oh boy, it's only a bloody boy, my boy!'

Blinking spasmodically, the babe discharged amniotic fluid from his nostrils, then let out a piercing, painful scream. Shocking – for this was not the standard yell of a newborn. No, something much shriller, more urgent, and with enough pitch to alarm both midwife and consultant obstetrician. This was not the usual infant squall of indignation, no clichéd cry for a return to the womb. No, this was a reaction.

Boy, oh boy, it's only a bloody boy, my boy! An alliterative epigram drawing its linguistic force from repetition, and executed with a suburban American accent (as heard in hits of the day such as *Bewitched*), had nurses and midwife alike chuckling. Even Sally White, my mother, afterbirth sliding from her stinging body, let out an involuntary laugh: a long breathy bleat of appreciation for her clever, funny, fertile husband. It was this little exchange, so normal, so natural, which made the baby holler. Mr White's lame first joke sluiced through the infant's brain forming a white bolt of dopamine which flashed in the baby's minuscule frontal lobes like a firework stood too close. Memories such as these should not (*cannot*) be stored in such a tiny brain. But from the first moment, it seemed that all experiences of humour were charged.

It's a strange condition, mine: a perfect, harrowingly precise perception of humour in all its forms, but coupled with an inability to laugh – even smile. And worse, from that first moment, the merest hint of someone else's joke could scorch like sunshine on a redhead's skin. They laughed, I cried. Life had begun.

Human history has seen a small but steady parade of the gifted: wild-haired composers and basement musicologists; freakish absorbers of concepts, visionary linguists; mathematicians spinning skeins of formulae that change the way we know our world for ever; paradigm-shifting painters; messianic weavers of tales which transmute

human consciousness into a finer moral substance. In fact, most forms of human endeavour, creative and scientific, have their talented, who function, if it can be called functioning, in a stratosphere unknown and unimaginable to those who savour everything they create.

Has there, however, been another like me? I do not mean a practitioner of humour – a gag-smith, a 'stand-up'. Neither do I allude to those creators of humorous, sublime tales (I am thinking here of Lee Fraser-Jones and other comic-narrative artists). No, I mean a true seer of humour. Has there? The answer is of course no. I am a one-off, and the thing that . . . happened, was my way of proving this. There may never be another – nor should there be. I am an abomination of art. An aberration of mind. A crippled crossbreed of imagination and geometry who should have been chloroformed at birth.

I don't even have stock tales of rejecting parents upon which to pin my self-loathing. No, it is worse than that. They were perfect parents. Perfect, loving parents. The trouble with love and perfection is that it needs a recognizable form of radiance in return. To see humour as I do can hardly be called a gift.

My whole 'myth' is as old as the world. It's been recycled and attempted over and over, each generation imagining itself the first with enough audacity or wit to realize it. But the myth, like all enduring myths, has been fattened by truth. Greek and Roman fable, Old English tales, ancient Indian poetry sly references in Chaucer right

up to the Monty Python German sketch. The idea is to compel through contradiction: laughter is a form of dying – a forgetting of self. Laughter and death: the contraction of both into story or joke seems almost lazy; yet our best poets and playwrights, the profoundest philosophers cannot resist it. I did not either.

The idea of genius in comedy, this imprecise art form, is a paradox – or more simply – a joke. Yes, one can paint precisely, yes, one can strum a harp with inhuman exactitude. One can jig word order to create a celestial narrative. But humour? Intangible, ungraspable, subjective humour. The idea is a nonsense. I am a nonsense.

A too-vivid memory: I was four years old. We went to my darling cousin Becky's house to watch the birth of some spaniel pups. Two of them, horrible mangled conjoined things, should have been stillborn, but came into the world wriggling and yelping. My father took charge of their 'humane disposal'. The soaking of the cotton wool, the sealing of the plastic bag. The image is still so clear: those wretched slimy mites writhing, fighting against fumes, dying in pathetic tiny convulsions. Should that have been me?

Eleven years later, when I was at the Centre, I was the only one whose 'gift' had no fixed numerical, linguistic, or spatial quality. Take Richard Gott, numbers maestro/genius and my best friend. He had a way of squinting when formulating thoughts, as though blocking out strong sunlight.

'When you leave here. What will you do?' he asked one day as we carried our plastic plates to the bin.

'A levels. And then university.' I was lying. The idea of 'uni' – all that laughter. No.

'I think so too,' he said. 'We could study together.'

'Will your mum allow it?'

'I'll be sixteen in a year. She can't stop me studying with you.'

'She didn't seem that keen last time.'

'That was my fault.' He looked down at the floor and fingered a bumpy scar on his left wrist.

'We can laugh at it now,' I said. I almost meant to make this joke.

Richard laughed and for a moment made eye contact. Very rare for him.

'You idiot, Benjamin.'

I'd chosen for my best friend someone who could not look directly at me. I won't pretend that this was an accident.

'Shall we do something later?' he said.

'I've got a fishing pass left.'

'Have you?'

'Spot Four on the lake is free. I already checked.'

'Excellent,' he said.

'Shall I meet you at 3 p.m.?'

'Three thirty,' he said. 'I've got Pastoral from 2 p.m.'

And we went too. Two boys double-crossed by blessing, whom talent had deceived, sitting in silence, lifting

wet dappled creatures from warm clear water, taking simple solace in stillness, in the quiet sense of a slow race which for once could be won.

Richard was not what you would call clever, nor even 'extremely numerate', yet his gift for numbers was undeniable and it marked him out as one of us. For Richard, each number had an individual colour, a texture; every sum, digit and multiple its own topography. He called it (as we all did when we learned this important term from Dr Rowe) 'synaesthesia' – the production of impressions in one sense while perceiving with another. The smell of grey, the sight of odour. I have it occasionally with compact jokes. I can almost feel the surface of a pun with my left thumb. Once, when were again fishing, I thought I had a carp on the line.

'It's huge. It's . . . it's massive!' I was about as excited as my voice allowed. Then the line went dead. The reel stilled, and the rod straightened.

'Pull the other one,' said Richard, laughing. And he pointed to his rod.

The other one. The contraction of the metaphorical 'other one' into the solid, banal reality of Richard's fishing rod was so dense, and quick and solid that instead of my usual cerebral processing I felt the coldness of a stone in my hand. My thumb pushing against it. All that language, all that happiness boiled into quick tight wordplay. My thumb felt it.

Richard could have counted the letters in the pun and

given its multiples in a moment. His talent was extraordinary. He perceived some numbers, especially prime numbers, with many senses at once – sometimes all five. Seven, all of its multiples, and any number whose last two or three digits could combine together to form seven as their sum he saw in 'angry purple', and experienced metallic popping noises in his left ear. His left thumb and big toe would heat at the tip, and he would testify to a smell of rotting blackberries in the room. All this within seconds. What I'm saying is, this should not be labelled 'genius'. His daily functioning was poor. He couldn't tell the time, read a shopping list without getting anxious. The only intellectual benefit was that he could instantly tell you (note: not calculate) a multiple's root simply by how he sensed it.

I cried a lot during those years. Not that I ever wept for my own fate; I mean, not in that direct sense. Not boo-hoo, I'm a freak child who lives at the Centre. No, I wept for others. Almost. Being honest – it was a kind of proxy too. A covert, sneaking self-pity. Looking back, maybe I was trying to express the last drops of love from my system. I failed, of course. It took cousin Becky for that. So I would sob: for Richard, for the nurses, for my grandmother – even for my mother after her weekly visits.

For years, when I heard the epithet 'genius' I took sharp offence; sometimes I would verbally attack the person who had used it. It was an insult as I saw it. A more physical person might have punched, but I live in my

skull, not my body. 'Genius' – what does that really mean? For me it signifies a kind of nerdish loner monk. In these days of comfortable mediocrity, people use 'genius' in a mocking sense, implying the uselessness of being too clever – neurologically overqualified for life. As for genius together with humour . . .

I will admit there have been, perhaps still are, a few brilliant comedians. The gratuitous phrase 'comic genius' can never truly be used. It's merely a comforting hyperbole for the flat-sounding but accurate 'very good comedian'. Comic and genius. Ha! The two concepts are mutually exclusive. Comedians imagine it's the material, or even more deludedly some sort of 'technique' that makes them funny. But even at the Centre, before the Centre, I knew. It's material plus the tiny secret parts of them, the parts they are blind to. This makes them what they are. No 'great comic' has ever been able to *see* all that. Anyone who could would not be a comedian. They would implode, or dissolve – simply not be, and never have been. Or be me.

The Centre could find no record of another genuine Savant Humour Perception case, and if the Centre had no record, there had been no case. By the way, when I say the Centre, I really mean Dr Rowe. He was, is, the Centre. I was 'of interest' to Dr Rowe, my ability being indivisible from my condition, or let's not dress it up – my disability. Benjamin White: for thirty-nine years, two months and fourteen days possessor of the most ridiculous and useless gift. I suppose my life has made no sense, and as now I rot,

I reflect on how natural it is that genius is mirrored by emptiness. No, never been another like me – and it was this fact that made those first five years so hard. I was an illness as yet unrecorded; a new type of blight. An uncategorized animal here to ravage the domestic nest, and it began right there on a green piece of towelling, that first instant; mewling and stretching my vernix-covered limbs, my father's wide grin gaping over me.

My father kept speaking. The room crackled with other people's laughter. Imagine: I could sense the nature of laughter before I knew what it was. These first seconds on earth, the same pattern as my next forty years: everyone else laughing, I understanding down to the last particle why and how they did so, but utterly unable to share in it.

I'll admit, some memories have been refreshed using old photographs, Granny Davids' stories and recollections – but the fact is (Dr Rowe's attempts to convince me this is impossible notwithstanding) I recall much of these first few days. I clearly remember for instance the squeaky feel of polyester-cotton around my body, a soothing antiseptic smell; fleeting sensations of comfort and safety, disturbed if someone so much as sniggered. Then, as now, human joy made up a large part of a maternity ward's atmosphere. Lots of comfortable, in-for-three-nights new mothers with plasticky flowers and brown-papered fruit. Just as many chipper gents bearing gifts and weak witticisms. The 1960s father: the last vanguard of male separatism, lauded by a horseshoe of seated family at the

foot of my mother's private bed. My father churned out freshly minted anecdotes about my difficult birth, my 'adorable' upturned nose, the hilarious dropping of forceps, the shameless Indianness of the consultant – cue: comedy accent.

For the first six hours, my whimpers that followed each burst of their laughter were ignored. Occasionally a maternal finger soothed. I did not cry constantly, just reactively. This kept my mother's fears on hold – perhaps I had sensitive hearing – an unknown yet normal fluid to be expelled from my ears within twenty-four hours? The next day, however, she began to worry. Her son seemed genuinely distressed by sudden noises. She hushed unruly admirers. But it was not the decibels of their laughter. It was the very fact of laughter itself; not just that, but the sequence of sounds and movements which preceded that laughter. These invaded my cot from all over. The worst offender from my family was Uncle Jeff. He died early. The only one who never really seem bothered by my problem – and he was the one to go first. A quiet soul – an outsider. Still, his poor jokes made his actual company intolerable.

As Uncle Jeff wrung out his comic posturing, telling the story of his little Rebecca's birth a few weeks before mine, I wriggled and bucked. I could not even control my eyelids, yet I somehow sensed the coming paucity. I could not understand language, but my instinct, though I was only two days' old, was perfect, but who can easily love

perfection. My mother would always smile as she described my father's flaws: his attention-seeking ego, his forgetfulness. He'd return the favour, savouring her sentimentality – her inability to finish anything. Faults, the humanness of imperfection.

Uncle Jeff worked his jaw, lowering wrists and hands, loosening them, miming his uselessness during Becky's birth. Later on, as I heard this story again (and a-fucking-gain) I realized why I had been so agitated at its first telling; a horribly hackneyed tale of male morphine-inhalation and loss of balance; a pathetic attempt at making himself vulnerable for comic effect. Uncle Jeff's 'routine' made me scream.

I found the smug good humour on that ward unbearable, as though a noxious gas were being pumped through the air-vents into my mother's private room. No one knew this, and I could do nothing. I just inhaled antiseptic and waited for stories to finish, and then the laughter came, and I screamed again. *I am here*, I screamed, I am in pain. Thus it was, less than seventy-two hours after my birth, Sally White, for the first time in her contented life, found herself overwhelmed with worry.

How strange, after all my boastings about memory, something drifts back for the first time. Lullabies. I had completely forgotten. What was this, four or five years later? Sometimes, in one of my bad moments, my mother would just hold me and sing. Cling and sing. Don't get me wrong, mostly she would cry or panic, phone my

father or worse Dr Rowe, but once in a while, she would scoop me up and hold me against her chest, and just sing. I squirmed, kicked, bit – but then the smell of washing powder. The close-up macro-focus on each green stitch in a winter pullover; and the song, words inaudible – only vibrations from deep inside her. These moments of parent–child tenderness grew more infrequent, ceasing altogether by the time I was nine. In the end, an analytical mind always defeats the good intentions of the heart.

I remember once we were discussing Jane Austen. I ended up punching the wall so hard that my little finger broke.

'Criticism is not the same as being critical, Benjamin,' my mother had said.

'You mean mollycoddling?'

'No – just . . . being – positive.'

'While at the same time being negative. Pah!' How old am I here? Nineteen, no – sixteen, just turned. I inverted the '6'.

'But it's good to keep a healthy attitude,' she said simply, as though righting an ornament fallen on its side. 'Dr Rowe . . .'

'Yes, looking at things with love. I know.'

'Well . . .'

'Mother – you sound like a Born Again.'

'Some things they get . . . right, Benjamin.'

We stirred our teas waiting for words. I watched the corners of her mouth contemplate uplifting sentiments.

With each movement of her cakey hands, crumbs showered everything in an annoying confetti.

'Your father and I had that positivity, Benjamin.' She smiled. 'Sometimes just hunting for the positive . . .'

I tuned out. Violence, as it so often did around this time, bubbled. A mint dropped in a Diet Coke. The neatness of her merge, the appallingly twee segue into something 'relevant'. I cannot bear any form of conceptual high-fiving. I mean – when the tidiness of a punchline or link is so crisp that the story-teller almost slaps the palms of his audience. In my opinion, adroitness has the opposite effect. It doesn't make an audience flow with the 'seamlessness' of the wit. No. Quite the reverse. For a moment, we all pause and admire the cleverness, the odious capability of the story-teller. And in that stop of admiration, we lose the illusion. We see the cocky little shit or shitess sitting at their fucking smug desk and smiling to their cunt selves. 'I'll try that later onstage,' they think, then go for a reward wank in the toilet. It's a cheap watch with the back removed.

'Mother, admit at least that *Hamlet* was awful,' I said, referring to an abortive production at the Guildford Seal, bringing the discussion back to more comfortable terrain. But this was a mistake.

She smiled, taking a long slow breath – a Socrates with rouge. 'What do you mean "awful"?'

'I mean wooden acting, and bad direction – all the reviews said it. It was complete shit.'

'Benjamin!'

'It was bad. Waste. Shit.' I savoured the coarse bark of the swear word.

'But does that change how one can love their efforts?' She lifted a fat slice of Battenberg onto a side-plate, crumbs sprinkling the cover of her green leatherette notebook.

'Love "effort"?'

She nodded, chewing loudly, cake mushing in her sated mouth.

I wonder: how many people have felt this? The deep irritation brought on by an optimist – worse, a cheery, cake-eating optimist. Is there anything more annoying than a self-satisfied person eating a sweet snack? Imagine the primal pleasure of snatching the cake of an optimist. Watching all their self-assured rightness with the world vanish under the imperious heel of one's boot as their treat is squashed into the carpet. Wouldn't it be something? Wouldn't it in some way be just – at least poetic?

A ball of chewed cake slid down her throat.

'Enough,' she said.

The roof of my mouth itched. I could feel irritation upgrading to violence. Clearing the tea things, she missed my reddening face, the backside squirming in the seat. As she turned away I pushed my chair backwards so savagely it hit our vomit-green kitchen wall making a deep gash in the plaster. Yet she smiled, a facile smile. Still, now, in the heat of it, she met my frustration, my boiling over, with a smile. That single semicircular flesh-symbol for everything I lacked. I think I leapt at her, screamed something bad

into her face. I punched the wall just to the left of her head. My middle finger crunched – a fracture. The clearest memory a silver fleck of phlegm landing on her chin as a curse word snapped from my tongue; that and the smell of cakes and home, the tick of Granddad's old clock. This outburst seemed involuntary, but really it was being away from the Centre. I mean, knowing that no Yellow Room could get me here. Sometimes after these bouts of rage I rather enjoyed, even cherished, my parents' attention. I couldn't win by meeting their Pollyannaism with reason, and certainly not with my own joy – so I broke theirs. I smashed it, crushed it and soaked myself in the attentive aftermath.

The Guildford Seal's *Hamlet*. My God. Anyway, I think my comedy reviews over the years have proved my case – that bad art *must* be unequivocally criticized, erased from history. Why patronize (and therefore mislead, hurt) the untalented?

Considering my condition, it was extremely unlucky that my parents were a colossal exception to the rule of opposites attract. Both witty, both charismatic, both loud, outgoing and 'fun'. Sounds fine, but who would choose to be the po-faced outsider at a perennial party?

Usually, when two loud people attempt serious love, it's not long before initial sparkles give way to fiery clashes. Normally they split. They seek out new, more introverted partners who will better complement them.