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Opening Extract from...

Lolito

Written by Ben Brooks

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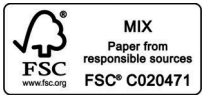
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Sometimes, when one person is missing, the whole world seems depopulated.

– Alphonse De Lamartine

Fuck you, you hoe, I don't want you back

– 'Fuck It',
Eamon

We're fifteen and drinking warm cider under the cathedral grounds' pine trees. It's seven-thirty. There's a dim orange moon and everything smells of just-cut grass. Alice takes out a tube of AcneGel, pushes it into my hand, and lies down, eyes closed. Sam and Aslam are talking about dogs, terrorism, and which rapper is the richest rapper.

'Nothing above the eyebrows,' she says. 'Last time you did it above the eyebrows and it rained and my eyes swelled up.'

'But his headphones empire,' Aslam says. 'The headphones.'

'Okay,' I say.

'But some behind my ears.'

'Isn't he dead?' Sam says.

'You don't have spots behind your ears.'

'He's definitely alive.'

'Spots might grow behind my ears.'

Alice is my girlfriend. She has a sharp nose, size four feet, and Raynaud's Syndrome. In the morning her mouth tastes of stale milk. I imagine her recent search history goes: how to make a Ouija board, does anal hurt, Haruki Murakami.

I massage white paste onto her cheeks in small circles. She kicks off her shoes. Her feet are the shape of kites. 'I'm going away for Easter,' she says. 'Dad just told me. We're going on holiday. To Antigua.'

'Oh,' I say. I don't want her to go on holiday to Antigua. I don't know what Antigua is. For the past two years, we've spent every school break motionless in her bed, watching *CSI: New York* and eating cubes of blackcurrant jelly.

'What's Antigua?' Aslam says.

'It's like. Um.' She scrunches her nose. 'No. I don't know.'

'Hawaii?'

'What?'

'It's not that,' I say. 'It's not Hawaii.'

Alice opens one eye. 'You don't know what it is. You don't know about countries.' I smear white down her neck and rub it into disappearance. The skin above her collarbones is thick and rough from daily benzoyl peroxide.

'I don't think it's that.'

'Well, it might be.' She does an *I don't want you to talk* face, pushes my hand away and sits up. She swigs cider and diamonds appear in her cheeks and I think again how I don't want her to go wherever Antigua is. 'It definitely might be Hawaii.'

'Hawaii's a country and Antigua's a different country.'

'Hawaii's a state.'

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'Oh,' Sam says. 'We're going to my aunt's in Crewe.'

'You're going too?'

'Mm.'

'This is retarded. What are we supposed to do?'

'I don't know.'

I know what I want to do. I want to remain in bed, watching documentaries about exotic marine life and sporadically masturbating over shopping channel presenters. I want to call Alice three times a day for reassurance that she isn't putting her mouth against the mouths of people who aren't me.

'Etgar?'

'What?'

'What are you doing?'

'My parents are away. I'm not doing anything.'

'Let's do something.'

A wide man walks under a streetlight. He looks vaguely familiar, like I've seen him in a dream or through a car windscreen. My body tenses. I imagine him holding

chloroform to our faces, carrying us away and solemnly dismembering our bodies on the floor of a urine-smelling warehouse. I press my hand against Alice's hand. 'Maybe,' I say.

'We could do bukkake on my dog and film it.'

'I don't want to do that.'

'Fine.'

I watch the man shrink, disappear, then momentarily reappear under a bowl of orange light. We finish the cider and say goodbye and leave. Me and Alice go to her house. Her dad's smoking in the conservatory, so we go upstairs, turn on Radio 4, and fall asleep to unintelligible chanting.

PART 1

Titanic

1

It's the first day of the Easter holidays. Alice has gone to Antigua with her dad and my parents have gone to Russia, to watch Uncle Michael marry a woman he found on the Internet.

I'm lying in bed.

I'm never going to move again.

I'm going to grow until I am the size of a car and the weight of a lion and my arms look like antennae. Firemen will have to cut me out of the house and a documentary crew will film it. Mum's friends will watch the documentary together, pressing their hands to their knees and mewing. *My Two Ton Son*. When I go into sudden cardiac arrest and die, they will call her to apologise and promise imminent lasagne.

Amundsen jumps onto the bed. He lies down, buries his head in my belly and exhales. The only thing I have to do over the next four days is walk him and feed him. Mum said that if he dies, she'll put me up for adoption. She was joking but I looked it up anyway, and you can't 'put people up for adoption'. There's a procedure. You have to give them to Social Services.

I push Amundsen off the bed and make *go away now* eyes. He's a colossal disappointment. He drifts around dumbly, licking cushions and jumping at moths and eating his own vomit. I wanted a dog that would save my life, like Lassie, so that we could become an inseparable and inspiring team, capable of astounding feats of strength and bravery. Amundsen does nothing. If you put a blanket over his head, he instantly falls asleep.

Aslam calls while the kettle's boiling. He sounds excited and his words are melting together. He wants me to go to a house party on Huntsdon Street.

'No,' I say. 'Absolutely not. I'm going to make a Nesquik tea and have a bath and watch *Frozen Planet* in bed.' Aslam's already called four times today, inviting me to two house parties, Shanghai Palace, and a clearing on the hill where Sam said people sometimes go to do dogging. Usually, he doesn't try to invite me to these things because I get anxious in crowded places and start to scratch my hands. When we spend time together we spend it in my bedroom or his bedroom or Alice's bedroom.

'*Frozen Planet*'s gay,' Aslam says. 'Stop being a pussy and come.'

'It's educational, poignant, and beautifully shot. You're gay.'

'Fine,' he says. 'Aaron Mathews is going.' Aaron Mathews tried to rape Alice with kisses at a party while I was visiting Gran in Leicester. She called me at 3.00 a.m. and loudly cried for twenty-five minutes. He doesn't go to our school and I have never seen him.

'No, he isn't,' I say.

'He is. And we can fucking smash his dick in. Elliot's coming. And Hattie.'

'Are you lying?'

'I am not lying.'

'If you are lying, I am going to smash your dick in. Also I think I am not capable of smashing dicks in so I might just break his phone or something.'

'Yeah, you can. I'll hold him down and you can crush his balls with a hammer.'

'I'm not going to do that.'

'Well, you should.'

'Why are you going?'

'For you.'

'And?'

'And also for Amy.'

'I don't know who that is.'

'I told you. I linked to her YouTube. She makes videos

of herself miming to rap songs. She's gone viral. I'm going to marry her.'

I laugh. 'I'll meet you by the sign in an hour. I'm going now. The kettle's boiled.'

'Good. Bye.'

I put a teaspoon of strawberry Nesquik and a teabag into my Forever Friends mug and add water. My hand is shaking slightly. I'm thinking of Alice and Aaron Mathews. I'm imagining a tall boy with impressive facial hair pressing his mouth against her neck while simultaneously squeezing her bum and left boob. I don't know if that's possible. I try it on an imaginary Alice and find that it's awkward and uncomfortable, but not impossible.

I feel small.

Like a field mouse lost in a supermarket.

Amundsen headbutts my knee and does a whine. He's dribbling and wagging his tail. I empty a can of tripe into his bowl and carry his bowl out onto the patio. Amundsen pushes his whole head into the bowl, motorboating his food. He lifts up his head and blobs of tripe are clinging to his nostrils. He walks towards me and I back quickly out of the room.

I climb back into bed and turn on my computer. I meet Alice. We say hellos. She says she's having fun and that she has to go soon. I ask what they've been doing. She says they've been sunbathing and swimming. I say that sounds great. We watch a video of two men being

killed. The men are members of a drug cartel. They are sat shirtless on a dirt floor, backs against a concrete wall. The first man gets beheaded with a chainsaw. He falls onto the other man. The other man stays sat up and the shape of his face doesn't change and they kill him with a bowie knife. It takes longer and involves less fireworks.

'That one was good,' she says. 'I've got to go. We're going out for dinner.'

'Okay,' I say. 'I miss you.'

'I miss you too.'

Elliot Trump has uploaded new pictures.

Katya De Vangelo has got Joseph Gordon-Levitt, popcorn and rosé ready for a night in with the girlies.

Carly Yates thinks that some people can just fuck off.

Horney milf wants you're cum

Sentence: ass raping til death

Dirty brit amateur swingers fuck in woods

A man and a woman are sitting side by side on thrones. They are wearing crowns and medieval clothing. The woman says that she wants King Dick to come back because her vagina is lonely. The man next to her says he is Prince Dick and he gently presses her thigh as she bites into a turkey leg. She shouts for the archery competition to begin. Amundsen wanders back into my room, sniffs at nothing and lies down on the rug. Three men in medieval clothing pull out their dicks and start fiercely masturbating while aiming

at a target ten feet away. I feel confused. I don't understand.

Carrie Machell is in a relationship.

I have won a free Macbook.

I take the sock off my dick and throw it at Amundsen.

2

Elliot and Hattie are kneeling on the pavement, rubbing Quiniderm into each other's cheeks. Aslam's leaning against the street sign. It's cold. He's holding a two-litre bottle of Tesco cola and a half-empty bottle of Captain Morgan's, looking at something in the sky. The blurry orange streetlight overhead lights up his face and puts his reflection in a puddle between his feet. He flaps his arms.

'Argh,' I shout.

'Bah,' Aslam shouts.

'Etgar,' Hattie says.

'Hi.'

'Hold this,' Aslam says. I take the bottle of cola out of his hands and sit crosslegged on the tarmac, wedging

it in the triangle of my legs. I unscrew the cap and grip it while he pours in rum. It splashes my hands. I spit and rub them on my jumper. Hattie crouches down and reaches into her bag.

'Etgar,' she says. 'I got you something.' She passes me a lump of yellow metal.

'Thanks,' I say. 'What is it?'

Aslam yawns and rum runs down my finger gaps.

'It's a knuckleduster. You put your fingers through the holes.'

'Do you have Parkinson's?'

'I don't think so.'

'I meant Aslam.'

'Oh. Anyway, I thought you could use it on Aaron. Or wave it around in front of him until he wets himself. I remember during that carol concert when that girl wet herself doing a solo at the front in the church and you could see her trousers go dark and then there was wee on the floor. It was amazing.'

'Thanks, Hattie,' I say. 'That's thoughtful.'

'Why do you have a knuckleduster?' Aslam says.

'It's shiny. I like it. Elliot bought it for me. He said I was so pretty that everyone would try to rape me at sixth form.' Elliot's the only one of us who isn't going to go to sixth form in the town next door to ours. He's going to work as a plumber with his dad, who smells of orange peel and cries when football players sing the national anthem before matches. 'He says I should be

prepared to fight them or kill them and he didn't want me to ruin my knuckles because they are the nicest knuckles he has ever seen.'

'Gay,' Aslam says. Gay doesn't mean homosexual. It means something else. It means sincerely saying the kind of things our parents would say.

'Sorry for being nice.'

'Gay.'

The rest of the rum disappears into the coke and I screw on the lid and mix everything up. We pass it around.

'Have you ever hit anyone before?' Hattie says.

'Loads,' I say. 'Once. No. Never. Zero times. Have you?'

'All the time. I hit Ella last week because she said I use Brillo pads for tampons, which I don't. It's easy. The secret is to pretend they're your dad.'

'I like my dad.'

'Someone you hate.'

'I don't hate anyone.'

'Then you can't really expect to be punching people.'

'He has to,' Aslam says, putting his hand on my shoulder and grinning. 'If he doesn't, everyone will start fingering Alice.' I roll a cigarette and light it, feeling unsure and insubstantial. Aslam makes a cupping motion with one hand. 'Feeding his pony.'

*

A girl I almost recognise opens the door of the house on Huntsdon Street. She has cropped blonde hair and is smiling and holding a bottle of WKD blue against her chest. She tells us to come inside. We come inside. People are scattered throughout the house. People are sitting and standing and talking and kissing. We drop onto an empty island of carpet next to the electric fire.

'There,' Aslam says, pointing at a group of three boys sat on the stairs. 'That's him. The middle one.'

'How do you know?'

'Facebook.'

'Is it really definitely him?' The boy is wearing stone-washed jeans and a white v-neck so low that one of his nipples is visible. There is a tribal tattoo around his forearm. 'Like definitely is it that one?'

'Yeah.'

'Doesn't he look a bit tall?' He looks extremely tall. The boy on his left looks like a tiger and the boy on his right looks like an aubergine. 'He has an actual tattoo.'

'He's probably a fucking pussy. I'll take his knees and you take his face.'

'I think we should talk to him first.'

'And say what? Thanks for raping my girlfriend. Fuck that. Let's smash his back doors in.' A girl to our right wrinkles her nose and raises an eyebrow. I try to smile but my face fails to make the right shape.

'Aslam, that means bumming someone.'

'I thought it meant punching the back of their head.'

'Why would it mean that?'

'I don't know. Just go. I've got your back.'

'I'm scared.'

'Just drink.'

'Fine.'

We take turns downing as much of the rum and coke as we can. It makes my belly pinch itself a little but I get more brave. When we are drinking I feel like my body becomes more solid and I am less likely to float into the sky or sink into the ground or disappear into nothing.

More people arrive and the house shrinks. It gets loud. Someone tells James that there's nitrous upstairs and he takes Hattie and they go.

'Ready?' Aslam says. We've been watching two people flirt with insults by the TV.

'Yeah.'

I stand up and fall to one side slightly.

'No,' I say.

'Yeah,' he says.

I right myself. My chest feels wobbly. I dig my fingernails into my hands until it feels like they're going to go through the skin. It takes twelve steps to reach the staircase. Twelve tiny steps. When I arrive, I panic. I stare at Aaron Mathews' shoes. They are white-and-blue Nikes. They are big. They are bigger feet than anyone I know has. I should make new friends. I should make new friends with atypically large feet and intimidating physiques.

‘Hi there,’ I say. I don’t understand why I said ‘hi there’. I have never said ‘hi there’ before in my life.

‘Hi there,’ Aaron Mathews says. He’s smiling. He looks at his friends and his friends look at him and they all do little laughs. I think about my bed and how I don’t understand why I’m not in it.

‘Hi there,’ I say again. I have no idea why I’m saying ‘hi there’. He should hit me. I would hit me. ‘Nice shoes,’ I say. ‘Very cool shoes.’ A reason I don’t like talking to strangers is because I find it difficult to simulate casual chat with them. Sometimes I memorise sporting news for use while standing next to men at urinals, checkouts and bus stops. Or quotes from films to fill in silences. But nothing seems relevant to now.

‘Are you taking the piss?’

‘No way, hoselay.’

‘What?’

‘Um.’

‘Is there something you want?’

‘Are you Aaron Mathews?’ I say. I look up at his face and his face is scary so I look back at his shoes. His nice shoes. His massive, nice shoes. I wish his face was a pair of nice shoes that I could put my feet into and jump up and down in until he apologised for what he did.

‘Yes.’

‘Great,’ I say. ‘That’s great. Do you know Alice Calloway?’

He laughs. 'Yeah,' he says.

'Did you rape her with kisses at all?'

'Did I what?'

'Did you force yourself on her?'

He laughs more. 'Forced her off me. Little slut.' He winks at one of his friends.

'Great,' I say. 'Thank you loads.' I turn and shut my eyes as hard as I can. I want them to stitch themselves shut. I try to walk back to Aslam with my eyes still closed. Laughing happens behind me. Someone shouts at me to fuck off. I think, fuck off telling me to fuck off. I think, where do I fuck off to? My body is as heavy as one hundred bodies. I feel like a magician who has accidentally sawed his assistant in half. I want to disappear.

'What the fuck happened?' Aslam says.

'He says she forced herself on him. I'm going to go.'

'Fuck that,' he says. 'He wouldn't admit to raping her. It's not cool any more. Go back and punch him.'

'I think I'm going home.'

'Fucking go back to him.' He stands up and pulls me up and pushes me forward. I hold my sleeve against my eyes. I look behind me. Aslam's leaning on the mantelpiece with his arms crossed, nodding wildly. I step forward. I have no idea what I'm doing. I'm a suicide bomber. I don't believe in anything.

I walk back to the stairs and stare at Aaron Mathews and lift up my hand. It has become extremely heavy. It

doesn't feel or look like my hand. Is it my hand? Probably, yes. I wonder where I should put my hand on his face. In films, people punch other people in their eyes. I don't want him to go blind, though. That would be terrible. He would sue me and I would have to give him all of the money I got after Nan died. I should punch him in the forehead. I should say something intimidating and then knock him out.

'You better get ready,' I say. 'Because at three o'clock today, I'm going to rape you.'

I blink.

Aaron Mathews punches me in the face.

I can't tell where exactly, but it is definitely the face. I fall over. Aslam jumps over me and lunges at Aaron Mathews. He grabs Aaron Mathews' hair. I don't think pulling hair is a very good fighting move. Jackie Chan never pulled anyone's hair. I start to stand up and The Tiger knees me in the chest. That is a good fighting move. It hurts. Fireworks explode inside my ribcage. I lie on the floor and roll to the side and look upwards. The Aubergine is going through Aslam's pockets. The Tiger tries to put his hands into mine. I grab hold of his collar and throw my head against his nose. It isn't my head any more. It isn't anything. I take Aslam's arm and pull him towards the door and we fall through the door and we run up the hill, looking backwards. Nobody follows. Hard air collects inside me and burns. I imagine my legs falling off and my arms falling off and my

dismembered head floating slowly up into the sky like a hot air balloon, clouds gripping the sides of my head, flashing planes reflecting in my eyes.

We collapse onto the grass at the park and lie on our backs, panting.

When our breaths are smaller, I say, 'Thanks for trying.'

'Are you okay?'

'No,' I say.

'You made the purple one's nose bleed.'

'Oh.'

'What was that rape thing from?'

'*Welcome to the Dollhouse*.'

'You have to stop doing that.'

'People say things better in films.'

He leans back on his elbows and tips his head. 'I think he was lying.'

'I don't know.'

'What will you do?'

'I don't know.' I tug handfuls of grass out of the earth. In the film version of right now, I would sprint back to the house, hoist Aaron Mathews up by his Adam's apple and shake him violently until he confessed to lying. Then I would helicopter to Antigua and kiss Alice on the nose. 'I'm sleepy.'