

Paolo Giordano: 'The Perfect Travel Buddy,' a Short Story

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Paolo
Giordano

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The abstinence started with Michele's arrival.

Michele is my wife's son. We haven't lived together for four years now, since he moved to Milan for college and Mavi and I moved into a smaller place, tailor-made for two.

When things started getting real bad in the north, Michele called me. I'm coming over tonight, he said.

Why?

Milan isn't safe.

But the trains must be full. And really expensive.

Trains aren't safe, either. I'm car-pooling.

I objected that an infected train was still preferable to six hours in some stranger's car.

The driver has a really good rating, he said.

A couple of hours before I was supposed to pick him up, I lay down next to Mavi. I told her: I fear I've forgotten how to live with the three of us together.

I haven't, unfortunately, she replied. Can you get the lights?

But I was nervous. I couldn't let her be. We had sex, and it was over almost immediately. The air in the house had a different density. I felt a kind of pressure.

Must be the anxiety, I said on my way back from the bathroom.

Mavi seemed to have fallen asleep.

Yeah, must be the anxiety, I said again. Because of the epidemic and all.

Her hand moved gently onto my forearm. I kept it there for a while, then I got ready to leave.

I waited for Michele at the spot we'd agreed on, an empty lot outside Rome, way over the bypass. Weeds in the cracks in the asphalt and glares from people at a local bar, probably because I'd been sitting in the car for the last 30 minutes. At 3 a.m.

I was thinking back to other similar moments, from when Michele was 9, 10, 11. Mavi and her ex-husband always chose unhappy places like this one for their hostage exchanges. Mall parking lots, intersections. I would sit in my car pretending I wasn't there. Mavi and Michele would get in, and no one would say anything until we got home. I'd choose music carefully, not too sad but not too happy either. It never really fit.

I watched Michele take an enormous bag out the trunk. Was he planning on staying that long? The driver stepped out, as did a young woman holding a small dog. They said their friendly goodbyes.

A couple of minutes later, now in the car, Michele was venting about her, she'd forced them to take a pointless detour around Bologna and hadn't told anyone about the dog. What if he'd been allergic?

But Michele isn't allergic to dogs. He's allergic to cats. When I took him to meet my parents he refused to step inside, insisting that the cat hair would give him an asthma attack.

After the rant he fell silent for a while. He was studying the darkness of the city outside the car window.

You don't see them outside anymore, huh? he said, eventually.

Who?

The Chinese.

When he was 9, 10, 11, Michele would refuse Ikea cutlery because, he said, they were made in China. We had never been able to remove that association between China and Ikea. We'd given up in the end, Mavi did, anyway. She'd bought him a set for his personal use, a set that said Made in Italy.

Maybe they're not outside because it's the middle of the night, I said.

But he insisted: You have to admit I was right about them. Admit it.

I did not. I kept glancing at his hands instead, keeping track of all the parts of the car he was touching.

I ended up blurting: Have you sanitized your hands?

Of course.

Then, as if in response to my inner protest against his presence, he added: I have the highest rating on the car-pooling app. As a passenger. Apparently I'm the perfect travel buddy.

A few days later, Italy was one giant red zone. No more traveling between regions, no more than 600 feet outside your own home. Everyone, no matter where they currently found themselves, had to shelter in place, including Michele. We were trapped.

As I got back from the store, I told Mavi: I could smell my breath inside the mask; it reeks a little.

She kept leafing through her magazine.

Maybe it's the lack of sunlight, I said. Not enough vitamin D, you know?

Michele walked across the kitchen shirtless. I wanted to tell him to cover up, that I didn't like him walking around like that, but it was never a good idea to talk to him just as he got up, so I didn't.

He looked heavier than me. His body seemed to take up a lot of space. Then I remembered having the same thought several years earlier, when he was a third of the size and hated me in that clear, straightforward way in which every child must hate his or her stepfather.

As soon as the bathroom door closed, I turned to Mavi: You see that? He's wearing my socks.

I gave them to him. He doesn't have any light ones.

But I care about those socks.

She looked at me oddly: You care about those socks?

I do. A little.

Don't worry, they're still washable.

Despite my efforts, I was annoyed. Because of my breath and because of my socks, though I wasn't sure which one I cared about the most. Or maybe because Mavi and I hadn't touched each other since Michele's arrival. I wasn't even sure which was the biggest factor in our drifting apart: Michele, the epidemic or that last disastrous attempt the evening of his arrival. At night, I'd stare at my wife's back in the dim light of the bedroom, and I'd see a ridge too high to climb.

In those moments, I'd often think back to an interview with a music star; I think I read it in Rolling Stone magazine, just after 9/11. The singer talked about how, confronted with the images of the towers and the smoke, he and his partner had started fucking furiously. Hours and hours on end, he said. Sex in the face of fear. An act of creation to ward off the destruction. Cosmic forces, Eros and Thanatos. That sort of stuff.

And here we were, Mavi and I. Stuck. Apart. As the world outside kept growing darker.

The socks were only the beginning. Michele's conquest would expand on multiple fronts, I knew it.

He quickly requisitioned the only Ethernet cable in the house that ensured a stable connection. For his online classes, he said. Then he took my headphones.

Earbuds are bad for him after a while, Mavi sided with him.

The only balcony in the apartment became his break room. Every day he'd line up white cigarette butts on the railing, I wouldn't refrain from counting them before throwing them in the trash. When I pointed out to him that the wind could blow them onto the downstairs balconies, he told me that was an unlikely scenario.

Finally, he asked me if he could use my home office. Before I could come up with a feasible defense, he added: It's not like you work in the evening anyway.

That was the first Friday of the lockdown. I took the time to chew my mouthful of chicken.

What do you need it for?

Houseparty.

I had no idea what he was talking about, but I said nothing. It would weaken my position.

It's quieter in your spot, Michele added.

I know. That's why it's my office.

Mavi gave me a disappointed look, so I stood up and opened the fridge, looking for nothing

in particular. There was a six-pack of Tennent's Super, his supplies for the evening.

Houseparty, I mumbled.

I later turned up the volume on the TV to cover Michele's laughter and the music blaring out of his laptop's speakers. The more he enjoyed himself, the lower my mood sank.

Doesn't it make you uncomfortable to be listening in on his party? I told Mavi.

He's letting off steam with his friends. They're all so far away, he misses them.

He could do it quietly! I almost said.

What I actually said was: It reminds me of all the nights I spent in the car waiting for him to leave a club.

Because suddenly all my years with Mavi and Michele were reduced to that: endless waiting. Waiting in front of a club, or in a parking lot; waiting in the bedroom in total silence; waiting for him to come of age so that Mavi and I could actually start living our life as a couple. Waiting to grow older so we could be young lovers. How had everything happened backward? And how had we ended up back at Square 1 just as we thought we'd made it? I let myself wallow in that comforting wave of self-pity.

That was maybe four times, Mavi said.

I turned the volume up some more.

No, I mumbled. It was way more than four.

The following morning I carefully studied the desk's white top. The amber halos of the empty beers were still visible. I took the cleaning cloth out of the closet, making a show of it, making sure Mavi saw me.

He hasn't changed, she sighed. I'll tell him not to use your office again.

Of course not, I replied. He was only letting off steam with his friends.

Nine more Houseparty Fridays took place in my office. Nine more weeks made up of identical days and identical nights. The longest that Mavi and I hadn't had sex, without even trying. We never talked about it. If we had, we would've convinced each other that the circumstances weren't ideal. And we would've felt worse for lying.

In bed, on the 71st night, I watched her ridge-back and imagined my own Rolling Stone interview:

How did you react to the pandemic?

By not moving.

What's the first thing you'll do when the lockdown is lifted?

Go see an andrologist.

Every now and then I'd hear Michele's baritone laughter. He would soon be moving back to Milan for the next phase. Was the city suddenly safe? No. But as he explained, almost guiltily, he was no longer used to the three of us living together for this long. I saw the place, emptied of his presence, I saw myself lying in the same spot on the bed, and I waited for a sense of relief that never came. What I felt instead was unsettled, the feeling growing stronger by the minute.

The number of infections was falling. I'd seen the local business owners cleaning their stores, getting ready. The excitement that came with a return to life was buzzing all around me, but there I was, in my bed, hoping for an upsurge of virus infections, hoping for the lockdown to never be lifted, for the pandemic to go on forever and ever and for Michele to never go back to Milan, for him to stay up every night, having online raves at my desk. Because the alternative would be for Mavi and me to ask ourselves what happened to us, why sex was so bad the last time and nonexistent since. Why we hadn't had sex in the face of fear.

The window was open, but I suddenly found myself gasping for air. I pulled off the sheet and sat up.

Can't sleep? Mavi asked me from her remote corner of the bed.

I'm thirsty.

I headed to the kitchen. Michele was there. Eating ice cream out of the tub. I took out a glass, filled it with water and sat down in front of him.

No Houseparty? I asked.

I didn't feel like it.

As always, he hadn't waited for the ice cream to thaw, so he was stabbing the spoon forcefully into the tub. I was about to tell him that he'd bend the metal that way. And that he was using an Ikea spoon without any complaints, but I chose to remain silent.

I met a girl, he said. We went to a private room. She wanted to ... yeah. But I didn't feel like it.

He didn't look at me. If he had, he would have seen my confusion, not at the conversation itself, but at having never thought of the possibility until that very moment of meeting someone in these circumstances, during a lockdown, on Houseparty, and even having sex with them. And yet, as he said it, with the naïve brightness of his 22 years, it felt perfectly natural.

I liked her, but I'm a little more complicated, he continued. Screens make me anxious for this sort of thing. To each their own, you know?

Without waiting for a reply, he nudged the ice cream in my direction.

You can finish it, he said. It's salted caramel, the best flavor if you ask me.

I stared at the spoon streaked with cream and saliva. Extremely high risk of contagion. I wanted to stand up and grab a clean one, but Michele was looking at me, innocently. So I took the spoon, brought it to my lips. Once, then again.

You always clean the sides, huh? he pointed out. I never care. I just go for the middle.

He left. I finished the ice cream, not that there was that much left. Then I headed back to bed.

What took you so long? Mavi asked.

Nothing. Just had some ice cream.

I raised my hand to her ridge-back. I grazed the middle, just beneath the soft creases of her top.

That's ticklish, she said.

Want me to stop?

No.

ThE+
perfect
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BUddY

By

Liz Moore: 'Clinical Notes,' a Short Story

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Liz Moore

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Fact: The baby has a fever.

Evidence: Two thermometers produce a succession of worrisome readings. 103.9. 104.2. 104.8.

Evidence: The baby is hot. The baby's cheeks are red. The baby is trembling. The baby, when he nurses, is nursing askew: mouth fluttering incorrectly, lips slack, hands and arms limp. The baby, instead of crying, is mewling.

Fact: Babies frequently get fevers.

Evidence: Both of the babies in the household have gotten fevers regularly over the time that babies have resided in the household. Three years and nine months is the length of time that babies have resided in the household.

Belief: The 3.75-year-old does not have a fever.

Evidence: The 3.75-year-old's forehead is cool.

Methodology: The 3.75-year-old's mother tiptoes into her room, breath held, avoiding certain floorboards, lowering lips to skin, lips being the best fever-readers on the human body.

Question: What thermometer reading necessitates a visit to the pediatric emergency room?

Research Process: The baby's parents conduct several internet searches using the following phrases:

Pediatric temperature emergency room 104.8 fever E.R

Answer: The internet returns two conflicting pieces of advice.

Go right now

Give Tylenol; call doctor

Response: The baby's parents look at each other silently for six seconds, considering more facts.

Fact: There is a new disease in the world.

Fact: It has entered the human population.

Fact: The baby's father was notified, yesterday, that three of his co-workers have this disease.

Acknowledgment: The timing looks bad.

Rebuttal: Babies get fevers. Babies frequently get fevers. The baby has no other symptoms aside from a fever. Most fevers in babies are not caused by viruses that have recently entered the human population. The other three members of the baby's family do not, so far, show symptoms.

Unknowns: Infectiousness of virus. Disease course. Time from exposure to symptom manifestation. Typical expression of disease in adults and children. Short-term and long-term effects on both. Typical trajectory. Lethality.

Declaration: "There are a lot of unknowns here," the baby's mother says.

Considerations: It's 1:45 in the morning. The baby's sister is asleep. One parent would have to drive the baby, alone, to the children's hospital. The other parent would —

Interruption: The baby vomits. The vomiting is matter-of-fact and unviolent. A bored opening of the mouth. The expulsion of the contents of the baby's stomach. Following the vomiting, the baby wilts. The baby falls asleep.

Considerations (cont.): — have to stay behind with the baby's sister.

Further considerations: Is it a greater risk to take this baby into a medical setting than to monitor him at home? If what the baby has is not the new disease — could the baby or his parent actually get the new disease, from the medical setting?

Decision: The baby's parents choose Option B. Infant Tylenol is administered. At 1:50 a.m., the doctor is called.

Correction: It is not the doctor. It is the answering service. The doctor will call back.

Interlude: The parents clean the floor. They dim the lights in the living room. The father lies down on the sofa, baby on chest. The father notes the heat of the baby's body, improbable, heat like a kettle, an engine. Heat derived from work, from spent energy, the work of the new little body going to war. The father remembers the baby's first days, recalls

swollen eyelids that opened and closed with real effort, underwater movements of fingers, considers how bodies of newborns are built like shields, the torso an inverted triangle, the limbs insubstantial. This thought reassures him. They are designed to survive, the father tells himself — an affirmation. The baby is 10 months old now. The baby has grown. His body is plump, his weight, on the chest of his father, both comfort and alarm, a reminder of all that has been invested into the baby's body (7,315 ounces of milk from the body of his mother, 722 raspberries, 480 ounces of yogurt, 120 bananas, 84 small pieces of cheese, 15 packets of small airlike food items called "yogurt melts," of which this baby is very fond, one taste of cake that the baby's sister furtively smuggled him), and aside from what's been physically invested into this baby's body, there is also the fact of their love for him. For his laugh. For the maw of his mouth, the three teeth the baby has sprouted, the way he has learned in the past week how to *give kiss*, the way the kiss is deposited, open-mouthed, on the recipient's cheek — and the hand of the baby, which the father now touches, which the baby has recently learned how to wave. On his father's chest, all parts of the baby are still now. All parts of the father are still. The mother sits in a chair, watching them. Watching her phone. Awaiting the call of the doctor. Three times, she checks to ensure her phone is not set to silent.

Observation: An hour passes. The house is quiet. Maybe, thinks the baby's mother, it will all be —

Interruption: The baby vomits. Onto the father's chest. The sofa. The rug. The baby lifts his head to observe what he's done. Lowers it directly into the pool of the liquid that has come out of his body. Returns to sleep.

Pause.

Command: "Take him," the baby's father says, quietly. "Take him."

Aftermath: The baby's mother takes the baby. Cleans him. The baby's father cleans his shirt, the sofa, the rug, his hair. Reclaims the baby.

Question: "What time is it?" the baby's father says.

Answer: It is 3:02 a.m.

Question: "Where the hell is this call?" the baby's father asks.

Decision: The mother, the milk-giver, will take the baby to the hospital. The father holds the baby, freshly changed, asleep, still smelling of bile. The mother packs a bag.

List: Into the bag go six diapers, one pack of wipes, two changes of clothes, two burp cloths — "take more," the father says, thinking of vomit — a manual breast pump, two bottles of pumped milk — in case of separation — an ice pack, one small soft cooler, water for the

mother, trail mix for the mother, a phone charger for the mother's phone. The mother's phone. Her wallet. Her keys, which first drop to the ground with a clatter.

Interruption: The baby laughs.

Question: "Did he just laugh?" the mother asks.

Answer: He did. The baby has lifted his head. He gestures, open-palmed, toward the keys on the floor. *I want.* The baby smiles.

Observation: The baby's eyes are alert. The baby's color is better. The baby is looking around the room, making sounds with his mouth. "Ohwow, ohwow, ohwow," chants the baby, an expression of awe. His first words, which he recently learned.

Deduction: "He's better," the mother says. "Let's take his temperature again," the father says.

Result:

Suggestion: "Maybe," the father says, "we can —"

Interruption: The phone rings. The doctor.

Advice: "She says we can wait until morning," the mother says.

Observation: The baby is rubbing his eyes. The baby looks tired.

Decision: The parents of the baby strip him to his diaper. Put him into a sleep sack, pink-trimmed, passed down from his sister. *His housecoat*, the mother calls it, remembering her grandmother's, remembering the candies her grandmother kept in its pockets, remembering the long tender feet of her grandmother, and the way she had of placing a hand on the back of the mother when she was ill, and the time she came and stayed with the mother when she had chickenpox as a child, watching "The Sound of Music" with her over and over again, never complaining or acting bored. And the thought of it moves her. All of those ancestors, all of that tenderness given to child after child, the last being this one — the baby she holds in her arms. As the mother remembers, she nurses the baby to sleep, tensing at every pause in his efforts, waiting for him to be sick again.

He isn't. For now, the mother will lay him down in his crib, in his pink housecoat, will watch as he sleeps, will lean down and place one hand to his forehead, testing again and again. Warm but not hot, she tells herself — though without the thermometer she cannot be certain. She lies down on the floor, next to the baby. Watches the baby. The baby is breathing. The baby is breathing. Dim light and shadow on the face of the baby. Through the slats of the crib, she touches one finger to the skin of the baby. Warm but not hot. Warm but not hot, she thinks — a chant, a prayer — though she cannot be certain.

CLINICAL NOTES

By

Liz Moore

A short story from The New York Times Magazine's Decameron Project.

Spot illustration and lettering by *Sophy Hollington*

Liz Moore is a writer of fiction and creative nonfiction. Her fourth novel, "Long Bright River," was published by Riverhead Books in January. She lives in Philadelphia.

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David Mitchell: 'If Wishes Was Horses,' a Short Story

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David Mitchell

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The New York Times Magazine

“No sea view? For 900 quid a week? TripAdvisor’s gonna hear ’bout this.”

She snorts. “On the plus side, Your Majesty, you’ve got your penthouse all to yourself. Jacuzzi. Sauna. Minibar.” She taps in the code, swipes her card and the LED goes green. “Home away from home.” Bolts clunk and the door opens. Bog-standard 8-by-14 foot cell. Shitter. Desk. Chair. Locker. Dirty windows. Seen better. Seen worse.

The door shuts behind me — revealing the bunk bed with some bastard lying on the top. He’s an Arab, Indian, Asian, something. He’s as not pleased to see me as I’m not pleased to see him. I bang on the door. “Oy! Guard! This cell’s occupied!”

No joy.

“Guard!”

Daft bloody moo’s moved on.

Today’s outlook: heavy cloud, all day.

Dump my bag on my bed. “Great.” I look at the Asian bloke. He ain’t got that Rottweiler glint, but yer don’t take nothing for granted. I’m guessing he’s Muslim. “Just came from Wandsworth,” I tell him. “I’m s’posed to be in quarantine. One to a cell. My cellmate had the virus.”

“I tested positive,” Asian Bloke says, “at Belmarsh.”

Belmarsh is a Cat A prison. I’m thinking, Terrorism?

“No,” Asian Bloke says. “I’m not an ISIS sympathizer. No, I don’t pray toward Mecca. No, I don’t have four wives and 10 kids.”

Can’t deny I was thinking it. “Yer don’t look ill.”

“I’m asymptomatic.” He clocks. I ain’t sure what that means. “I’ve got the antibodies, so I don’t get sick, but I have the virus, and I can pass it on. You really shouldn’t have been put in here.”

Voilà. Classic Ministry of Justice fuck-up. There's an emergency call button, so I press the CALL button.

"I was told the guards here cut the wires," Asian Bloke says. "Anything for a quiet life."

I believe it. "Prob'ly too late by now, anyway. Viruswise."

He lights up a roll-up. "You may be right."

"Happy fucking birthday to me."

Water chunders down a pipe.

"Is it your birthday?" he asks.

"Just an expression."

Day 2. Pogo Hoggins, who I was banged up with at Wandsworth, snored like a Harrier jump jet. Zam the Asian Bloke's a silent sleeper, and I wake in OK nick. When the floor-hatch is slid open for the breakfast tray, I'm ready on my knees to get the porter's attention. "Oy, Mate."

A weary-as-hell, "What?"

"First off, there's two of us banged up in here."

I see a Nike trainer, a shin and a trolley wheel. "Not according to my printout." Big Black Geezer, by the sound of it.

Zam joins me at the gap. "Your printout's wrong, as you can hear. And we're supposed to be in isolation, in single cells."

Big Black Geezer shuts the hatch with his foot. It sticks for long enough for me to ask for a second breakfast box.

"Yeah, nice try." The hatch slams shut.

"You eat it," Zam says. "I'm not hungry."

The box has a pig on it, with a speech bubble saying, "Two succulent pork sausages!" "What, 'cause yer can't eat pork?"

"I eat very little. It's one of my superpowers."

So I wolf down the single sausage. It ain't succulent, and it ain't pork. I offer Zam the

crackers and out-of-date yogurt. Once again, he says no. Don't need to be told twice.

Today's outlook: cloudy, with bright patches.

The telly's a knackered box of junk, but today it gives a bit o'Channel 5. "The Ricki Pickett Show." Must be a repeat: Everyone's packed into the studio, breathing in one another's germs. Today's show's called "My Mum Cradle-Snatched My Boyfriend." Used to watch Ricki Pickett with Kylie when she was pregnant with Gem. Used to find all them snarling whinging sad sacks tearing chunks out of each other funny. Not now. Even the saddest, poorest and sorriest have got what I ain't. They don't even know it.

Day 3. Feel rough. Nasty cough. I asked Big Black Geezer for the doctor. Said he'd put me on the list, but he still gave us only one breakfast and one lunch box. Zam told me to eat it. Said I'd need to keep my strength up. Ain't been out of our cell once. No exercise yard. No shower. Thought quarantine'd be a doss, but it's bad as solitary. The telly gave us half an hour of ITV news. Prime Minister Spaffer Bumblefuck says, "Stay alert!" President Very Stable Genius says, "Drink bleach!" Half of America still reckons he's God's Gift. What a place. There was a bit about how the stars are coping with lockdown. Didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Then the telly conked out. Did a few press-ups, but my cough came back. Ain't only air I'm gasping for. I'll ask Big Black Geezer to hook me up with spice. Double bubble on tic but needs must. Lunch was powdered oxtail soup. Foxtail soup, more like. Drank it down and saw this rat on the edge of the sink. Big brown bastard. Could chew yer toe off. "See Mr. Rat? Acts like he owns the place."

"He does," Zam said, "in several senses."

Chucked my trainer at it. Missed.

Only when I got up did Mr. Rat scuttle off down a hole under the bog. I stuffed some pages of the Daily Mail in to block it off.

All the excitement wore me out.

Shut my eyes and slid downhill.

Today's outlook: overcast; rain later.

Thought 'bout Gemma, the last time Kylie brought her to Wandsworth. She was 5 then. She's 7 now. On the outside, time's fast and slow. Inside, it's slow. Lethally. Gem brought her new My Little Pony to Wandsworth. Kylie got her for her birthday and told her was

from me. Actually it was a Fake My Little Pony from a pound shop, but Gem didn't mind. She named it Blueberry Dash. She said it was basically a good pony but a bit naughty 'cause it peed in the bath.

"The things they come out with, eh?" Zam said.

Day 4. The quack said, "Mr. Wilcox, I'm Dr. Wong."

Saw Chinese eyes above his mask. My throat hurt, but it was an open goal: "I'd rather have Dr. Right."

"If I had a tenner every time I heard that, I'd be in my mansion in the Cayman Islands." He seemed all right. Took my temperature with an ear gizmo. Took my pulse. Took a swab from up my nostril. "The testing's still woefully haphazard, but I'd say you have it."

"So is it off to a clinic full of pretty nurses?"

"Half the pretty nurses are off sick, and the clinic is full. As is the overspill ward. As long you're merely uncomfortable, you're best off roughing it out here. Believe me."

My hearing was weird. When Zam asked 'bout the special Covid hospital in East London, his voice sounded far-off.

"They're not admitting prisoners," Dr. Wong told me.

Pissed me off, that. "Are they afraid I'll nick my own ventilator and flog it on eBay? Or is it that us guests of Her Majesty's hospitality don't deserve to live as much as everyone else?"

Dr. Wong shrugged. We both knew the answer. Give me six Paracetamol, six Ventolin, and a tiny bottle of Codeine.

Zam said he'd make sure I followed the instructions.

"Good luck," Dr. Wong said. "I'll drop in soon."

Then me and Zam were on our own again.

Water chunders down a pipe.

Stay alert. Drink bleach.

Six fat sausages, sizzling in the pan. Tell Kylie 'bout my wacko prison nightmare. 'Bout Laverty's flat, prison, Zam, her and Gemma and Steven. God it felt so real. Kylie laughed. "Poor Lukey. ... I don't know any Stevens." Then I'm walking Gem to school up Gilbert's End. Light greens, lush greens. Sunshine on my face. Horses running across the fringes like in Red Dead Redemption. Tell Gem how I went to Saint Gabriel's school, too, once upon a time. The year I stayed with my Uncle Ross and Aunt Dawn right here, in Black Swan Green. Mr. Pratley's still the headmaster. Ain't aged a day. He thanks me for accepting his invitation. I tell him how Saint Gabriel's is the only school I went to where it weren't Bully or Be Bullied. Next up, I'm in my old classroom. Here's my cousins Robbie and Em. Plus Joey Drinkwater. Sakura Yew. "It's been 30 years since the coronavirus changed our world," Mr. Pratley says, "but Luke recalls it as if it were yesterday. Isn't that right, Luke?" All eyes on me. So the virus is now a history lesson. So I'm 55. Time flies on the outside. Then I see him. At the back. Arms folded. He's Him, I'm Me. No-name terms, us two. Gunshot wound in his neck's opening and closing like some underwater valve-mouth off David Attenborough. I know his face better than I know my own. Fixed. Knowing. Sad. Silent. That's the face he had bleeding out on Laverty's sofa. Half his throat was missing. It was his shooter. We was fumbling for it. Bang. Wish to fuck it hadn't happened. But if wishes was horses, beggars would ride. I wake up. Sick as a dog. Sorry as hell. Three years before the parole board even look at my paperwork. Day 5 of quarantine. Storms closing in. Thunder. Why do I have to wake up? Why? Day after day after day. Can't do this no more. Just bloody can't.

Day 6. I think. Gales. Stabs of lightning. My body's a body bag. Stuffed with pain, hot gravel and me. Three steps to the shitter and I'm done. It hurts. Breathing hurts. Not breathing hurts. Everything bloody hurts. It's night, not day. Night 7. Night 8? Zam says I'm dehydrated. He makes me drink water. Zam must use the shitter when I'm sleeping. Tactful. Pogo Hoggins shat morning, noon and night. Mr. Rat got to the breakfast box before me. Ate his way inside and nicked the sausage. I ain't hungry but still. Could die in here and nobody'd know till the pandemic's over. Mr. Rat would know. Mr. Rat and his hungry friends. If I died here, what'll Gem remember of me? Skinny skinhead skull in prison PJs, blubbing at her picture of Mummy, Daddy, Gemma and Blueberry Dash. Give it a few years, even that'll fade. I'll be a name. A face on a phone that gets deleted one day. A skeleton in the cupboard. The family offender. Drugs and manslaughter. Nice. Gem's future pictures of her family'll be her, her mother, Steven and baby brother. Not "half brother." "Brother." And yer know what?

"What?" Zam pours my Codeine. "Drink."

I swallow it. "It's best for Gem she forgets me."

"How do you figure that out?"

“Who’s feeding her? Clothing her? Keeping her warm in winter? Buying her her My Little Pony Magic Castle? Model Citizen Steven. Project Manager Steven. Business Studies Steven.”

“Is that so, Self-Pity Studies Luke?”

“I’d belt yer one if I could lift my arm.”

“Consider me belted. But doesn’t Gemma get a say?”

“Next time she sees me, I’ll be over 30.”

“Ancient.” Zam’s older. Can’t tell his age.

“If, if I’m lucky, I’ll be working in an Amazon slave mine. Most likely, I’ll be begging outside Tesco’s until I end up back here. Why’d Gemma — or any daughter — want to say, ‘He’s my Dad’? How can I compete with Steven?”

“Don’t. Concentrate on being Luke.”

“Luke’s an addict homeless loser sad sack.”

“Luke’s a lot of things. Be the best of them.”

“Yer sound like an ‘X-Factor’ judge.”

“Is that a good thing or bad thing?”

“It’s an easy thing. Yer talk proper, Zam. Yer’ve got a bank account. Education. People. Safety nets. When yer get out, yer’ll have options. When I get out, I’ll have my 28-quid discharge grant, and. ...” Shut my eyes. Here’s Laverty’s flat. Here’s the bloke who’ll always be dead. Dead. ‘Cause of me.

“What we’ve done isn’t who we are, Luke.”

My brain’s a featherweight stuck in a cage with the Hulk. He just keeps pummeling. “What are you, Zam? A fucking vicar?”

Never heard him laugh till now.

“**Morning, Mr. Wilcox.**” Chinese eyes. A mask.

Fever’s lifted. “Dr. Right.”

“Caymans here we come. Still here?”

Today's outlook: brighter patches, dry. "Ain't dead yet. Feel OK. Thanks to Nurse Zam."

"Good. Who's Sam?"

"Zam. With a zed." I point to the bunk above.

"Are we talking ... a higher power? Or the prison governor?"

I'm baffled, he's baffled. "No. Zam. My celly."

"A cellmate? In here? During quarantine?"

"Bit late now for the shock 'n' horror, Doc. Yer met him last time. Asian bloke." I call up:

"Zam! Reveal yerself."

Zam keeps shtum. Dr. Wong looks stumped. "I wouldn't have tolerated two inmates in one cell on the quarantine wing."

"'Fraid yer bloody did tolerate it, Doc."

"I would have noticed a third person in here. There's not exactly a wealth of hiding places."

Water chunders down a toilet pipe.

I call up to Zam, "Zam, will yer just tell him?"

My cellmate doesn't reply. Asleep? A windup?

Dr. Wong looks worried. "Luke, have you had access to drugs of a more recreational nature than the ones I prescribed? I shan't tell the guards. But as your doctor, I need to know."

"This ain't funny, Zam. ..." So I get up and stand up and find Zam's empty bed with no sheets or nothing.

IF
WiShes
WAS
HorSes

By

David Mitchell

A short story from The New York Times Magazine's Decameron Project.

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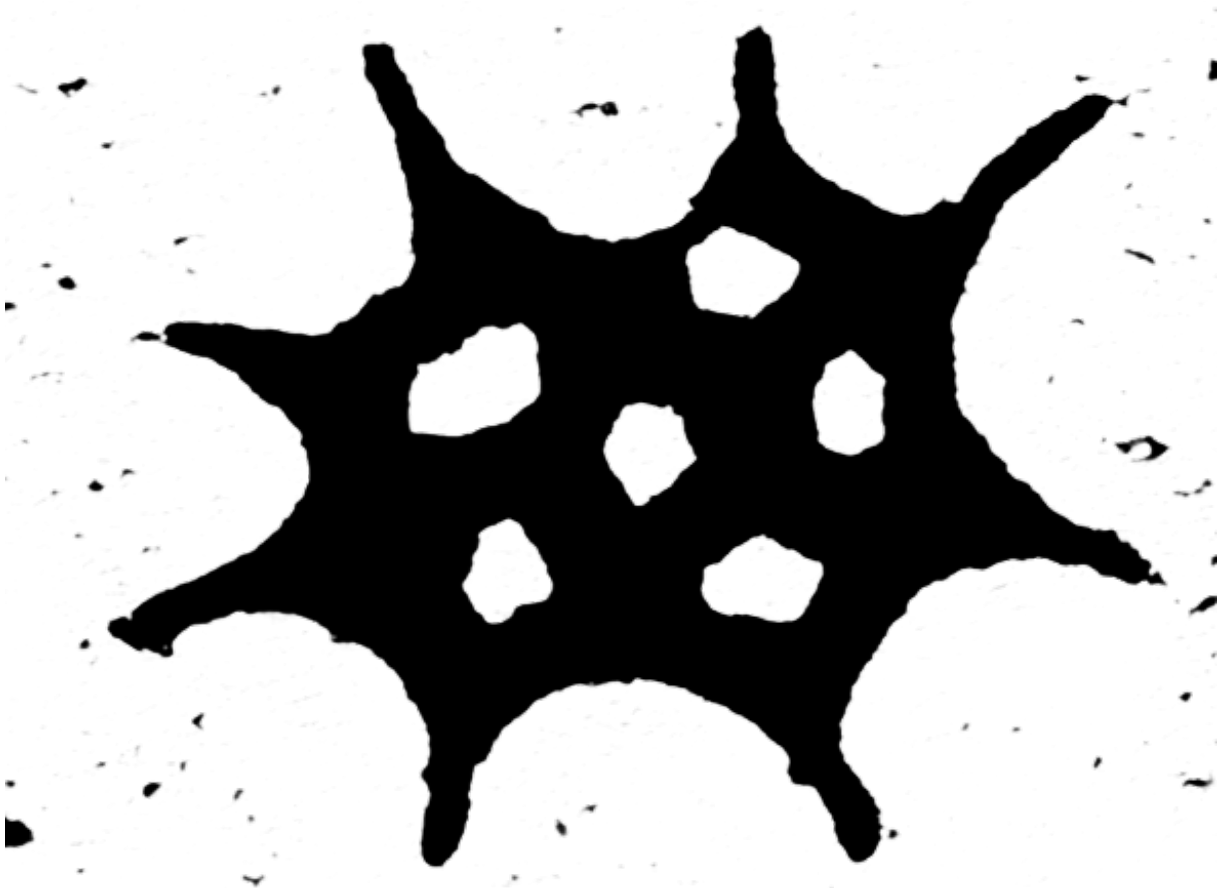
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