

streetcake

issue 54



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Temples of Tulum

Pain cries of forced need—
a city lost to rain and
rot; the god of maize
spread his wings, and the wind
carried his body
over the jungle

Heart's blood can ease
some aches; a machine's
loving embrace
could be coils
of fate

Staring into obsidian
planes, a prophet
looks on the centuries
to follow

Pyramid steps,
stations of the boss—
a great bird darkens a wetless sky;
the forest draws
its children home
with a maw of green
blades and iridescent
cries

robert ford

Purged

Eyes gummed open, tearless,
you're storming back home
straight into the knifing rain,
every window wound down
into itself, fingers restless,
unable to make the required
shapes. Maladjusted clouds
flee the sky. Behind them,
the moon has hung and drawn
the night especially for you, but
this isn't really what you want.
Not with the radio drowning you,
full volume, with the news.

Faking It

'It's like when the boss invites you down to the pub at 4:30 – it's fine to leave work early if you're going along with everyone else, but you couldn't just skip the pub and go shopping.'

Is my colleague saying this for my benefit? I have skipped the pub before. Why the hell can't you go shopping, if you don't care to waste another minute of your day with these idiots? Why should you stay behind in the office staring listlessly at a screen while everyone else is getting pissed?

Even in the office, when you've run out of work to do, there are acceptable ways to waste time. Everyone's allowed to check the sports pages, browse the internet for new shoes, or update Facebook, but doing some other form of paid work is frowned on, apparently. You heard about the IT developer who sub-contracted his work out to a guy in India? It's only what the big corporations do, but when the individual does it, they come down on him like a ton of bricks. That's why I wrote my novel in the cells of a spreadsheet. No need to flip from one tab to another when the boss walks by. I simply stick with my serious-looking spreadsheet, and keep typing my paragraph into one of its cells. At the end of the day, when everyone else has gone to the pub, I paste all my writing into an e-mail and send it to myself, for further editing in the evening. There's just no way for an aspiring author to make a living without a day job, but I was too tired to write from scratch when I got home. Editing I can cope with.

The problems began when my novel was published. Jan, a great reader, outed me. He came over one Monday morning, clapped me on the shoulder and cried congratulations loud enough for everyone to hear. He'd been browsing new crime fiction at Foyles that weekend, and whose name should come across but mine. He didn't bother to ask if it was the same person: my name's so unusual that there could be no doubt. He said how much he was looking forward to reading it. Then other people started asking questions. Self-obsessed as usual, all they wanted to know was whether the story was based on real life.

'Did you change people's names?'

'Will I find myself in there?'

I told them it was entirely made up.

My boss asked, casually, where I found the time to write.

'Evenings and weekends,' I said, praying he didn't perceive the blush creeping up my neck towards my ears.

'As long as you don't burn yourself out!' he said, pointing a finger at me. 'We need you to be giving us 100%.'

My book wasn't really mentioned after that. Jan occasionally waved his copy at me when he arrived in the morning, having read a chapter or two on the way in. I could tell they were discussing the book behind my back, though, because my colleagues suddenly started refusing my offers to make tea. Did they seriously think that I'd write a novel under my own name about an office poisoner, and only then embark on my life of crime? Surely, if I'd intended to slip arsenic in anyone's tea, I'd have already done it, at the research stage.

I used to enjoy the little events and inane interactions of the working week: the home-made cakes, checking livestream kitten cams, sharing video clips of fighting giraffes or screaming goats, occasional visits from children and retired former colleagues, gathering at the window to gawp at an argument or an accident in the street below. But these days I'm getting tired of my colleagues' office nonsense: sticking their names on chairs so that they can claim ownership and drag them out from under you; their evil glances if I take a single chocolate from a neighbouring team's stash; forgetting my birthday, when everyone else has their day wearing the sash and crown, a cake with their name on it and a card signed by everyone.

My boyfriend's office comes with its own nonsense, slightly different but equally disheartening. Extra tasks that materialise at the last minute, forcing him to stay late. A quagmire of self-promotion and backstabbing. And never a single 'thank you' or 'well done'.

One evening, after we'd each finished venting over dinner, spoiling our appetites like we do every night, I had an idea.

'What if we could just leave?'

'Leave? Like, quit our jobs?'

'Not exactly. What you might call "French leave" or, as the French say, "filer a l'anglaise".'

'You mean, kind of disappear.'

'Exactly.'

'It has its attractions: no leaving party, no questions about what you're doing next...'

'And no notice period.'

'Best of all. The joy, if I could just not turn up tomorrow! I'm surprised people don't do it more often.'

'I guess they want a good reference.'

'Or money. That's what would happen first: immediate halt to your cashflow.'

'No, first it'd be angry phone calls and e-mails asking where the hell you are.'

'And you could just ignore them. I'm liking your idea better and better.'

We smiled blissfully at each other across our plates, strewn with potato skins and stray spinach leaves.

We didn't enact our plan the next day. But over the following night's dinner, we began to refine it. We imagined what we'd do if our boss came to knock on the door, or if a disciplinary letter arrived to frighten us into returning to work. We began to calculate how long we could stretch out our savings in different countries: Montenegro or Bosnia seemed like places you could live modestly.

'I've heard you can make a decent wage in Macedonia writing fake news,' I said.

Ultimately, we both disliked the idea of living in fear of people looking for us (and the embarrassment, if we were ever found). So we disposed of our racier novels, sex toys, cracked plates, chipped mugs, threadbare socks, and grey stretched-out underwear: all the stuff you wouldn't want people to find and pass judgment on. And then we faked our deaths. I won't tell you how: it might give you ideas. Suffice it to say, we chose the method with the least real danger and the most plausibility.

Sitting on the terrace of a smoky cafe in Veles, I try to get the waiter's attention. He ignores me.

'It'll be better once we learn the language,' my boyfriend says.

'I hope so – we've been sitting here for hours, and I'm dying for a coffee.'

'Have you had any messages on your phone yet?'

'None. I thought they'd have contacted us by now – we were supposed to be back in the office yesterday.'

'I guess they give people at least a day's grace before they start bothering them. Our return flight might have been delayed, or our managers might assume there was a misunderstanding about which day we'd be back.'

'Or what if they didn't even notice? Did you ever think of that?'

It's a depressing idea, how little we matter to our colleagues. But the idea that I never have to go back there, that I've left without saying goodbye, fills me with a feeling of lightness. It's like ten years have dropped off; I can barely feel my body. My boyfriend and I exchange knowing smiles across the empty table. I signal to the waiter again. He looks through me.

You didn't figure they'd be giving out prizes.
At least, not for anything more than reaching
the age of 37 with most of your hair
and a back that only aches sometimes.

But the guys in the truck have been around.
They're trash collectors and they work for the city.
They empty your green bags full of greasy pizza boxes
and failed kitchen experiments.

The award is that they take your stuff
just as they do your neighbor's.
This lack of discrimination should be enough
to buoy you through another night at the supermarket

stacking shelves, taking inventory.
Who knows. Maybe there's a follow up prize in all this -
your picture hanging on the wall along with all the other employees
who've been working there more than a year.

And what do you know - more reward.
The mailman's been by handing out bills.
You get the one for electricity and gas.
That's your name in the window of the envelope.

It feels as if it comes with a blue ribbon.
Not like your name on the deed of your two bedroom house.
Your parents died and left it to you.
That's why you don't treat the house of some kind of medal.

There'll be no party for you. You don't know anybody.
Certainly not any women. Those are laurels you'll never
be able to rest upon. But the trash collectors came.
You rolled your bin back into the garage,

squeezed it in the gap between the walls
and your father's rusty old Ford.
You once wondered what it would be like
to lock yourself inside car and garage

and then turn on the engine. But you'd called the plumber about a leaky tap and his van pulled up just as you were about to try out that experiment. And there he was on your doorstep,

bag of tools in hand. You were a customer. You had business with a tradesman just as if you'd been the guy across the street. You were 36 at the time. You figured you wait and see what 37 brought you.

my Home
my Home
how can this continuity
can I be this continuity
part of your this continuity
continuity locked in a box
continuity crumble like Maya
tap into the continuity
Electricity
of the continuity in the heart of a dead
electric man
who is not alone but
convinced of alone
Supported
got job
hobbies
pet house
bookshelves
bodies
electric bodies
my body
I am touching a body
made of my body
made of sand made of
my body
made of erudite chickenwire
made of sinews
girl
came here
touched my heart
of paper flesh
tried not to
cry
again.
& what I know
what a man knows
what a man's eye
nose knows
is nothing
don't even know my
own name
am I my neighbor?
Culprit? Fiend?
How the
Existence
oscillates?