

I: o darlin'

from A by Tom Bullough

- So, said Fay a little dubiously, you've never had insurance or tax or anything, on anything, ever?

Pete puckered his lips, thinking.

- Er... yeah, he admitted. I suppose I've not.

- And no-one's ever done you for it? I mean, you've been driving for nine years or something?

- Mmm, eight or nine. Something like that. He took a cigarette from the packet on the seat beside him and tapped its filter a few times against the steering-wheel. Well, it's luck, isn't it? It's like not paying on parking meters. You just need a bit of a streak, then you've saved enough to compensate any fines or whatever.

Pete lit the cigarette, steering with a corner in the road. Fay was smiling; there were shadows beneath her cheekbones.

- So, you saved up the money you would have spent?

- Oh no, said Pete. It's just a principle. Like, obviously, the actual money goes on women and cocaine and islands and that.

Fay's relief on leaving London had hit her like a wave. For the best part of an hour, she'd stared at trees and the occasional passing house in a state of near-bewilderment. A pressure had fallen from the sides of her head, like the walls had fallen from the verges as they rolled out of London. She felt fresh, unconstrained. For the first time in years, she wasn't yearning for anything.

- Fi-fi! mumbled Paolo on the seat between her and Pete. Oh... bella Fifi!

Fay stretched her arms above her head, arching herself between the floor and the seat-back.

- Okay, she said, sitting back down. Who's Fifi?

- Not me, said Pete.

Paolo was snoring erratically, his head lolling back over the seat, jerking upwards as he breathed.

- Fammi un bocchino! he groaned.

- I think he might like her, said Fay, taking a tape from the glove compartment and replacing the old one in the stereo.

- Paolo! said Pete. Hey, Paolo! Who's Fifi?

Paolo opened his eyes painfully, wincing at the bruising on the side of his face.

He frowned at the hedges pressing in on either side of them, then at Fay, and finally at Pete.

- What? he managed. What did you call me?

- Who's Fifi? said Pete.

- What's Fifi to you?

- Paolo, you were rolling around moaning Fifi! Bella Fifi! I think we ought to know who she is.

- Oh, that Fifi! said Paolo, apparently reassured. Bella Fifi! My God! Now, she was a woman! You know, she had this thong...

- Not that bloody model! said Fay. She was never called Fifi!

- What's wrong with Fifi?!

- Oh, come on! said Fay. The whole thing's cheesy enough without her being called Fifi as well.

- Excuse me! said Paolo. Fifi is a very respectable name. Infatti, I even have a sister called Fifi.

- Do you? said Pete. And you dream about her?

- Okay, okay, said Paolo. I'm going back to sleep now.

In the back, the air was awash with smoke. The never-repeating breakbeats drifted between the curtains, easy among the debris and the sprawling bodies. On a side-wall, a mad-eyed heavily made-up woman stared down from a poster, snakes in place of her hair. An enormous Indian drape coated the ceiling overhead, falling into folds at the bottom of the opposite wall.

- Are... Are we here? asked an Australian over the music. Are we unique?

Tim sat insensibly a couple of feet from the rear doors, his back against the drape and his eyes turned up to the little windows - awestruck - like they were icons, or glimpses of sky from a prison cell. Now and then he cupped his hands into a makeshift bong - an enormous joint was pressed between two of his left-hand fingers - and smoked. His gaze was unwandering.

To Tim's right, Nick was splayed face-down across the discomposed bedclothes, his head straying onto a corner of Belle's cushion pile. His hat had fallen off and his hooded top was hunched like a carapace some way up the back of his neck. Belle's legs were arched over him - floaty-trousered - her toes touching and her eyes steady on the burning tip of Tim's joint.

Fay watched the passing hedgerows and thought about Dartmoor, where she'd lived before her parents moved to Bristol. They'd had a farm at the head of a valley, a square of buildings with a yard in the middle. When you drove up the

track from the nearest road you could hardly see the house at all; just the barns with their thick stone walls, slitted in the hay-lofts, impenetrable-looking as a castle.

Fay would go out on the moor at night, climb the tor behind the house and follow a path till the hill levelled off and the lights from the house disappeared. There was a rock up there: a huge, glacial thing with a niche in its side that she'd always fitted in perfectly. She'd sit there for two hours sometimes, wrapped in an enormous coat, buffeted by the wind or rain or snow, insensible to anything else.

- When did you get this ambulance, then? she said, turning to Pete.

- Oh... said Pete. Five, six years ago, maybe? I don't know. I'd been on this bender. I think I was at the Electrck Temple or Return to the Source or somewhere like that - to begin with anyway. It was when them places were still kind of new. Do you know what I mean? Basically, I woke up one day naked on the floor of some flat I'd never seen before, and I'd got this bloody sun tattooed on my stomach!

- The war scar, said Fay.

- The war scar, said Pete. I mean, it was pretty rough when I found it. I had to get it tidied up and finished off and that... Like, to begin with, I thought it was a joke or something, except for it wouldn't come off. I'm not even sure that I didn't go and get it done myself.

- Urla troia! moaned Paolo.

- Anyway, so I was wandering round Leeds with my brain deep-fried. No girlfriend, no flat, no job, no fucking car... I reckoned I had to possess something, do you know what I mean? Basically, anyway, I wound up at this police auction thing and got the ambulance for fifty quid I was supposed to have been saving. There's always something wrong with it - the brakes or the carb - but it's not bad for fifty quid.

- I once stopped breathing and woke up in an ambulance, said Fay. There was a drip in my arm and stuff, and one of those things they stick in your nose. No tattoo, though.

- What was that, then? said Pete. He glanced at her, then double-declutched as the lane began to incline. Booze?

- A mixture, said Fay. Various things, all jumbled up together. I didn't even drink for six months after that. I mean, I still hardly do anything now. It was just a couple of years when I kind of went ballistic.

Pete was looking quizzically at the meters behind the steering-wheel.

- I never knew about that, he said eventually. Funny, isn't it? I mean, all the time

we've spent as a group and nobody really knows a thing about what anybody else was like before. It's like, the way you are on the first day of the first year, that's the way you stay. Except for the odd story when something groovy happened, someone went travelling or something, that's it. I'd never even thought about it. I just assumed you'd always been straight.

- Oh, I have been, for ages. But... I mean, I did want to know what all the fuss was about. You know? It's like, you went to Castlemorton, didn't you? That massive Spiral Tribe rave. I mean, things like that are a big deal when you're at school and everything. I'm not saying that's why you went, but... when I was seventeen or eighteen or whatever, I was really needing something. You know? I felt empty, like there was this bloody great hollow inside me. So I started doing drugs and going to parties and stuff; but pills and acid and what have you, they're not about closing you down. Do you know what I mean?

- It's funny, said Pete, a moment or two later, I couldn't hardly remember Castlemorton the Monday morning after it happened. It kind of hardens, though. It becomes more solid, more... important. You should have seen the papers that week, though! Screaming about anarchy and what have you. I tell you, my skin was bristling the whole way down my body. Every bit of it! I mean, I know what you're saying, and you're probably right. That sort of thing was good cred, but... It was just like - us and them - and we were alive even if them fuckers weren't! I believed in it, you know? Basically... I still do.

With a roar, the ambulance topped the hill and began meandering - idling - down the other side, the road ahead of it silvery in the moonlight. Over to the right, exposed-looking lines of streetlights were woven together as if for mutual security. Slowly the moon swung away leftwards. Pavements pushed back the hedges. Fractionally different houses and regular orange lightbulbs rolled in from either side.

Having left Dartmoor, Fay had never quite felt the same about it again. She loved it, of course, but returning was just that. The immense spaces weren't the same without the farm to go back to; the kitchen and its hexagonal tiles, the dog sprawled under the table. She'd started to drive back down there on her own when she was old enough, parking just down the track from the farmyard and climbing the tor till she got to her rock. The niche was too small for her now, obviously, but she'd sit on another part, pressing her knees to her chest, closing her eyes, feeling the wind and hoping to be absorbed by it - even for a moment.

That probably was why she'd had the dangerous phase, Fay reflected. Dartmoor, then four years' perplexity, then wastedness because she just hadn't felt like herself any more. None of them had, if she were honest about it. Her parents had drunk gin, and watched television, and ceased talking to one another; and in the end she'd only really recognised her dad in the evenings, for about half an hour before he fell asleep. Fay had just felt like she was withering, becoming someone else's idea of herself, like her real self had dumped her and pissed off across Dartmoor, whooping and cheering because it didn't have to worry about keeping warm or eating or any of that physical palaver any more.

Tim hadn't so much as twitched in the last twenty minutes, so Belle crawled across the bedclothes and pulled the half-smoked joint from his fingers. Tim's eyes opened a little, but he said nothing.

- I am not just a pretty face! said Paolo drowsily.

He stretched - rolled his shoulders - then reached into a trouser pocket, removing his phone and wallet and stowing them in the glove compartment.

Once he was comfortable, he closed his eyes and reconjured up Fifi.

The ambulance was coming to a gradient, beginning to struggle, brown-leaved hedges tight around the mirrors. In front, a badger trundled unconcernedly across the lane, locating its path through the undergrowth and scaling the bank.

- Bollocks! muttered Pete.

He began to grow rigid over the wheel, willing the ambulance onwards; then he frowned and, abruptly, swung the wheel left, stopping the engine in an open gateway. The headlights were on a dozen or so large, round bales that someone had arranged into the shape of a steam train.

- Shit, shit, shit! he said, jumping down from the step and hurrying round to the front.

A moment later he was back at the door.

- Belle! he said urgently. Pass us a drape out, would you?

- What? said Belle, half-asleep. What's going on?

- Just pass us a drape, Belle. Please.

An arm extended from the back into the cab, an ornately patterned bedspread hanging from its hand. Pete grabbed it and wrapped it hastily around his own arm, heading back to the bonnet and releasing the catch in a smoke signal of steam, smothering the window in condensation.

- Madonna! said Paolo, waking suddenly. Fuck! Pete, what's happened?

- We've got a flat tyre, said Pete sourly. What do you think?

- No! exclaimed Paolo.
- No, what? said Pete, retying the drape around his arm.
- No! said Paolo again. A flat tyre? It's not possible!
- Paolo, you are a halfwit. Pete gripped the radiator cap and twisted it. A plume of steam exploded into the air. Fay climbed down from the passenger side, watching as it slackened.
- The bloody temperature gauge's bust, said Pete.
- Oh shit, said Fay. Oh well. It'll cool down in a bit. Wicked train, don't you think?

She walked over to inspect it, her face white in the glare of the headlights, her hair in a ponytail, doing the zip on her fleece up to the neck.

The train had four round bales for its wheels. It had three in a cylinder for its body, and for a funnel and a cab respectively it had two heaped at the near end and one at the far. Both were crowned with a thatch of grass. Connected by a piece of rope, the tender was a bale laid lengthways, with another at each end for wheels.

Pete lit a cigarette, leaning against the front of the ambulance, watching as Fay climbed in stages onto the cab and sat down. She looked out over the hedges, shoulders back, legs hanging loosely. Away down the hill, the town stood out in dots of orange. The main road was a shadow and a pair of passing lights. Small, sinuous hills lay in folds across the countryside, their crests picked out by the moon.

It was straight above the funnel - due west - close enough to the ground now to pronounce the missing sliver.