

m: open sesame

from A by Tom Bullough

Strange that the sky should elect to be blue. Strange too that it should be grey – or red, for that matter – but there was something more, something proportioning, about blueness. It put Pete in mind of painting lessons at primary school: the stratum of blue they'd all laid out along the tops of their pictures, with mothers, or houses, or dogs underneath. The memory still jarred when he thought of it, the teacher leading everyone out into the playground and asking if anyone could actually point to the blue streak they insisted on painting.

– Don't know... they'd mumbled, one after another, when asked why they did it. It had been miserable, trooping back inside and filling everything between the earth and the ether in with a blue felt-tip.

The evening before, Pete remembered, he'd spent pressed up against the television, one skewy eye shut, trying to see what went on around the corner. Although he hadn't quite managed it, the idea had possessed him of looking at something more than house, mother and dog, through something larger than a little window. So he'd painted the earth – a blue and green splodge – with a fat blue line just above it. A really good idea, he reflected, much better than everything being blue. It was like, to see the mother, house and dog in the first place everything couldn't be smothered in blueness, right? It had to change somewhere. And his changing place had been a fat blue line in space. You'd never see that through a little window of a picture.

The teacher had sighed when she saw it, and made him do another one with the dog and the sky and everything on it like it was supposed to be. She'd kept a bit of an eye on him from then on, and once told his mother at a parents' meeting that he was, quote, Too much of an individual for his own good.

Pete was lying across the front seats of the ambulance, his head tipped back, looking at the twigs hanging upside down into the blueness, the auburn leaves, the ridge of the Black Mountain that traced the line of the windowsill. It seemed like such a long time since he'd looked at anything above the horizontal.

It was the pangs for nicotine, though, that finally made him pull himself upright. He folded the blanket he'd been wrapped in, sitting it on the seat beside him and fumbling through his pockets till he'd mustered enough tobacco for a cigarette: dry old bits that kept getting in his mouth and making him cough.

On the passenger side of the ambulance, a bank sloped towards a small, gorged

stream. With a last puff, Pete threw away the cigarette and climbed inelegantly out onto the lane they were parked beside. He tied his heavy brown dreadlocks into a knot on top of his head, and went to splash water on his face. Behind him, the sun was beginning to make its way over the mountains, a shadow sliding down the west face of the valley.

Then, as he crouched beside the water, light grazed the top of a beech tree on the opposite bank, and an oak, and another beech; and, gradually, the brown of the leaves on every side of him became reds and oranges, greens and golds. The sky itself seemed to sparkle as Pete reclimbed the bank. There was still no sound from the back of the ambulance, so he sat on a gate across the road, looking over a field with a pair of firs in its middle and the long, level Black Mountain running past behind it.

The car approached quietly, appearing round a corner to Pete's right, gleaming white in the sunshine. It was an Austin Maestro, not in the best of states, its police stickers starting to peel and rust in patches on the wheel arches. It drove slowly past Pete, then stopped, and reversed.

- Alright? asked the officer, leaning an arm on the sill and squinting against the sunlight.

He was sinewy-looking man, improbable in his uniform, with bushy sideburns and shaggy black hair. His eyes ran over Pete's dreadlocks, his piercings and drooping clothes. He looked more curious than suspicious.

- Fine, said Pete nervously, revolving on the gate to face him. I, um... It was getting late, so, you know, I thought I'd better stop for a rest.

- Been here the night, have you? asked the officer.

- Just a few hours, officer, said Pete.

- Well, I just thought I'd check you'd not broken down or anything.

- Oh no, said Pete hastily. No, everything's fine.

The man raised a hand to shade his eyes.

- What is it, then? Three-litre?

- Er, yeah... Three-litre, diesel. It's a Tranny, basically.

- Used to have one myself, reflected the policeman. No end of trouble it was. No bloody end. Just like this thing, as it goes.

He tapped the Maestro.

- A bit of a pair... said Pete.

The policeman chuckled.

- Damn right they are! Bloody junk! A Tranny to save people's lives, and a Maestro to chase criminals! What in God's name were they thinking? He chuckled again. You come a long way, then?

- London, said Pete, unthinkingly.

- London, echoed the officer. I went down there one time. Before I was a copper...

He paused as if waiting for Pete to press him on the subject, but resumed anyway when he didn't.

- Not my sort of place, if you don't mind me saying. No offence, like. Bloody noisy it was. I was in... round the middle, it was. Can't remember too much about it, tell you the truth. Lot of houses and pubs. By Christ, we got pissed!

- Were you down there long? asked Pete.

- Oh, just for the game. Long enough, though, I don't mind telling you... Where you headed?

- To be honest, said Pete, I'm not really sure where we are right now, but I'm supposed to be in a place called... Llyswen? You know it? Near Hay-on-Wye.

- Ah, Llyswen, said the policeman. He frowned and glanced along the valley. Well, you're on the right road. Just keep going straight, over the Gospel Pass. Take the first left once you're out on the flat there. You can't miss it... I'm off to Hay now, as it goes. 'Fact, I'd better be getting along.

- Thanks, said Pete.

- That's alright. Cheerio, then.

He nodded.

- Cheerio, said Pete.

The Maestro rolled slowly off along the lane, skirting the perimeter of the field and becoming lost among trees where the road curled left.

Out on the road, Belle was gazing at the mountains, her arms out to either side of her. Now that the sun was a little higher, the reddish-brown bracken on the mountains had started to glow. Even the rowans and the hawthorn trees were shining. Pete was perched on the gate he'd been perched on all morning, rooting through his pockets for more tobacco. A little way down the lane Fay was sitting cross-legged on the verge, scribbling in bursts in a notebook. Belle wanted a cigarette. She really wished that she could just stand there with her arms out - warm air on her skin, a germ of elation in her stomach - and find it all enough. But the idea of a cigarette kept worming its way back into her head, promising it would make the germ consummate. It was like, when she felt happy she always wanted to feel happy: pilled-up happy. If a feeling wasn't perfect, it was never quite there. That was why she would sometimes make out that things were wonderful, when really they weren't that great, or go on about

psychic or emotional bonds with people, which, in truth, weren't as striking as she did really want them to be. She was always trying to wish things into existence. It worried her sometimes.

- This is it, said Pete, gesturing with a second, miserable roll-up. It was all I could scavenge from the cab, my pockets, everywhere... Maybe Tim's got some. I don't know. I don't suppose Paolo has.

Belle walked round to the back of the ambulance, pressing the rubber button and swinging one of the doors open. Inside it smelt of old smoke and sweat. She wrinkled her nose and assessed the mess. She'd really slept in here?

- Tim! she said loudly. Hey, Tim!

Tim was crumpled in a corner, like he'd fallen there from somewhere high up.

- Eugh? he managed.

- Tim! Belle repeated. I need a cigarette!

- I was, Tim moaned, after a pause, visited!

- What? said Belle.

- Finished, Tim corrected himself.

Belle did a breathing exercise she'd learnt in India in her gap year: sucking in air through her nose, holding it, saying Mahatma Gandhi in her head, and breathing out through her mouth. She kept up the exercise until she felt less irritable; then she returned to the others.

- We have got to get some cigarettes, she said.

A sign saying Llanthony appeared as the ambulance turned the corner at the end of the field. There was a yard on the left, a couple of farmhouses gathered round it and an oak tree in a radius of leaves in the middle. A couple of dogs were busying themselves in corners.

Behind the yard fields ran up into pine woods. Farms were sheltering in hollows, their boundaries blurring with the desolate common land where sheep were specks in the bracken and streams like vein mouldings cut their way among rocky outcrops.

- A pub! said Nick excitedly, leaning in from the back and pointing. Oh, a pub! Thankyou God!

- It's nine in the morning, said Pete soberly.

- Yeah, but... Jesus, Pete! A pub!

They drew up outside one of the Bull's oak-framed windows, Nick and Belle peering against the sunlight to try and work out if anyone was inside.

- Well, said Belle. I'm going in.

She swung the passenger door open and jumped down onto cobble stones, steadying herself and breathing – Mahatma Gandhi – a couple of times before approaching the heavy, tar-black door.

The room was dark and it took a moment for Belle to distinguish what was in there. Then she saw flagstones, vertical pine-panelling, a billiard table and a stone ash-filled fireplace. There were a lot of what seemed to be redundant organ stools scattered around tables peeling veneer. Dried flowers hung from the beams. The walls were covered with precise watercolours of horses.

Belle looked at the watercolours and found them entrancing. They reminded her of when she used to ride herself. There was a bay, startled in a beam of sunlight beside the window, lissom, with a star on its nose just like Stella had. She really had to go and see her again sometime.

– Oh, hi! she said suddenly.

A man in a red rugby shirt was sitting on a stool at the far end of the bar. He was staring at her, a pint of bitter in his left hand.

– Alright? he said, clearing his throat.

– I'm very well, said Belle, primly.

She smiled – thick pink lips, even teeth – then became aware that the man was inspecting her chest.

– I was, er, wondering if there might be any cigarettes for sale here, she said, embarrassed, trying to stifle her middle-class accent. I'm quite badly in need of one.

– You are, agreed the man.

Belle looked confused.

– Here, he said, changing tack. He picked up a packet of Rothman's from the bar and removed two.

– Oh... Thankyou! said Belle. I... She dithered a second then took one, leaning forward as the man lit it for her, ignoring the fact he was peering down her cleavage. Ohh! she said, exhaling.

Belle felt a slight headrush, then much better disposed to the world around her. She rather liked this little pub, if not so much its occupant. It had an authentic quality to it. She wondered vaguely how much it might cost.

– That was very kind, she told the man, who for some reason was rolling his shoulders like an athlete. I wonder, though. I have some friends outside who would like to buy some. Do you think...?

She smiled attractively.

– Joelene! called the man over the bar. Joelene?

– What?! shouted a voice.

- You open for cigarettes?

There was a sound of footsteps, and a round-eyed young woman in a tight, extra-large T-shirt appeared. A small boy with a scheming look about him flitted in after her. He peered at Belle around the bar, then rolled back his eyes and stuck two fingers up his nose.

- There's a machine behind the door, said the woman, gauging the situation. You help yourself.

- Thank you very much, said Belle, smiling again and trying not to look too beautiful.

There was common land in every direction, the ridges of the Bluff and the Twmpa smaller now and the engine returning to a rumble as the road flattened out. A cattle grid purred beneath the wheels. On the far side of the valley a final farm was clinging to its fields, a great, stirrup-shaped pine plantation stretching down a cirque behind it.

There were screes, gorse bushes, weather-torn hawthorns, the gnarled banks of tiny brooks. There were footpaths resembling cartoon lightning strikes. The tails and manes of fat mountain ponies reached almost to the ground. Then the last piece of stream vanished up its spring. The mountains met in a V of seamless blue.

Pete stopped the ambulance just beyond the col, pulling into a wheel-eroded layby with a burnt-out Escort upside down on the slope below. No-one, it seemed, had been expecting the mountains to fall away so rapidly. They climbed from their various doors in silence - a couple lighting cigarettes, wonderingly - and stood in a line on the lip.

- It's different to Portmeirion, observed Belle, garnering her Welsh experience. The skies were not in fact perfectly clear. Beyond the flood plain spread below them, beyond the bleak, lesser echo of mountains on the valley's other side, above the endless waves of hills, there was the odd wisp of whiteness: uncertain, like a smear on the lens of an optical instrument.

It was the colours that were the most striking, or perhaps the curling sheerness of the Twmpa, or the emergence of the Wye from its Welsh confinement to wander shimmering across the sudden plains of Herefordshire.

The slopes below were green - evolving from moss to emerald with their plane to the sun - ruddy brown where the bracken was thick, tawny where a decrepit baler had left stubble and damp bales. There were greys and silvers in the river; chocolate browns in the valley; reds in the wooded gorges; unfolding blues in

the sky; fiery unknowableness in the sun.

Fay, for her part, thought about hedges, about enclosing things. She imagined the forested wilderness that had once covered the landscape; the people cutting piece after piece of land from it, making the unknown known, so each space acquired a sense and identity in relation to every other – like language, a structure that gave itself meaning. Looking closer, she could even see where there had once been other hedges lacing the expanse of the flood plain, where there were now only shadows.

Tim put a lighter to the joint he'd been rolling, and climbed back into the ambulance.