

Light and Silver



Michael Bryson

paperbytes

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Light and Silver

I WAS IN LONDON the week the IRA resumed its bombing campaign, ending eighteen months of peace. Donna, the Australian I had been chasing around Europe for the previous six weeks, dragged me to the scene.

“Bloody marvellous,” she said, when we saw the skeleton of a building left behind by the bomb. The police kept us from getting close, but we saw enough. Donna trained her long lens on the shattered ruins and shot half a roll of film. It was amazing, the destruction. I thought of Oklahoma City, the front of the federal building blown off by reconstituted fertilizer.

We spent the afternoon in Hyde Park, then tramped over to Buckingham Palace where Donna took pictures of the soldiers and

their machine guns.

In the evening, we stopped at the Unicorn, a pub in the theatre district not far from where a week later a bomb tore the insides out of a double-decker bus. Donna rushed off to that site, too, but I spent the day touring the British Museum. The wreckage still sat in the street when I met her at the Unicorn for lunch the next day. She had gone off on a photo shoot by herself and then called the hostel where we were staying to say that she wouldn't be back that night.

At the Unicorn she sits with a sharply dressed young man. Peter, the Croatian poet and refugee.

“He's writing a play,” she says. “About the war. But he really wants to write a novel.”

Peter nods. He is clean shaven with remarkably strong features, high cheek bones, solid jaw line, deep, penetrating eyes with a softness around the edges. Donna says that she bumped into him on a street corner. She asked him for directions but soon realized that he

wasn't a native. Peter was a journalist, a translator. He spoke four languages and dreamed of being a novelist. He was living with friends in St. John's Wood.

He leans across the table, ignoring me, and takes Donna's hand.

"You should come take pictures in Croatia," he says. "I would show you good places."

"But there's a war on," I say.

He leans back in his chair. "There are many wars," he says.

I ask him what he means.

"In your country, you are fighting the French."

"You've been misled."

"The French are ...," he says, pausing to find the right word. "Separate, yes? They desire to be separate."

"Our Prime Minister is French," I say, but I don't think he hears me.

"The French desire a country," he says.

"Some do."

“And the Aborigines,” says Donna.

“Excuse me?”

“The Aborigines. You have them in Canada, too. Like in Australia,” she says. “They want their land back, so they can live like they did before.”

I’m not sure what to say.

Then Peter says, “So you see, you also have wars.”

I let it pass, ask Peter where he’s from. I ask him to tell me about his country. Europe intrigues me, though I’m not a scholar by any means. I’ve always had a New World love-hate relationship with the continent. The imperialism, the wars, the monarchs. I tuned it out. But now I’m sick of the simple politics that I accepted in my youth. I’m convinced that the Cold War was a brain disease, a mind-fuck of monumental proportions, and it seems to me that European history might have some lessons about how to get beyond our obsession with binary-based politics at the end of the twentieth century. Us and

them. Men and women. English and French.

Peter lights a cigarette and tells his story. He talks about the hills around his village back home, the valleys where he played as a kid, and the goats, and the sheep, and the priest who taught him English and who pushed him to get an education. No one in his family was educated, but the priest supplied a scholarship and persuaded his family to let him travel to the city. It's a fascinating tale, and I'm drawn into the rustic scenes and the images of the villagers who eventually shunned him and his book learning.

"In the city I met so many people, so many different people. I was amazed," he says. "I used to go to the market just to see all the people. At the school, we talked about poetry. It was the first time for me. I saw that the world was a big, big place, and I wanted to see all of it. I read about so many places and I wanted to go to them all. I was like a flower that has been hid from the sun. I grew very fast when I was set in the light."

We order food and drinks. Peter keeps talking. He tells us about the war and the fate of the community of artists in the city where he lived.

“We had marvellous theatre. Many painters, many writers,” he remembers. “We were Serb, Muslim and Croat, all together. We believed in each other. The war was a disease that destroyed us.”

He pauses and lifts a forkful of English salmon into his mouth.

“It must have been terrible,” I say. When I was in public school I sat beside a Vietnamese boy who had fled with his family. They were boat people, and I heard how they climbed aboard a barge with hundreds of others and drifted in the ocean for days. They were attacked by pirates, looted, forced to land on a deserted island and marched at gunpoint to a refugee camp. It’s a story that I carry with me, and I’m never sure what to do with it.

Peter reaches for the ketchup.

“What happened to your friends?” I ask.

“Some left,” he says. “Some joined the fighting. Some tried to go

on like before, but the war flooded the city. It went into every crack and filled up every basement, every cabinet, every closet. No place could escape it. No one evaded it. Everything changed. The beauty of the city was ruined. We tried not to give up hope, but we knew everything that we had worked for, everything we had built was gone.”

“Then you left?”

“No. I stayed. I was in love. My lover refused to go, so I stayed. We hung onto what we could. We waited to die. We were very happy together, but – it did not last.”

I wait for more, but Peter says nothing. We eat in silence. I catch a glance of the television news. The police think that one of the people killed in the bus explosion was the bomber. The blast appears to have been an accident, the news announcer says. The bus was not the intended target.

“Grand,” says the bartender.

“Fucking pathetic terrorists,” says a customer.

I look again at Peter, but he's not watching the news.

"I would like to ask you something," he says.

"Sure."

"Tell me about Canada. I read a book –I don't know." And he pauses to rest his forehead in the palm of his hand and strum the top of his head with his fingers. "Alice Munro," he says eventually. "A book about women and girls."

"*The Lives of Girls and Women*," I say.

"Is that it? Yes. You're right."

"You read that?"

"Yes," he says. "I met a woman from Canada. She was in my country, helping the victims of the war. Before she went home, I asked her to send me Canadian books. She sent me this one by Alice Munro. I have not talked to anyone about it. You are the first Canadian I have met since I read it."

"Did you like it?" I ask.

“Yes. Of course,” he says. “But the question is more than liking or not liking. Alice Munro has written a very interesting book. I like it because it is interesting, but I don’t know your country, so I do not understand everything.”

“Canada is a confusing country,” I say.

“I do not understand why you say this.”

“Alice Munro sees only a small part of a big country,” I say. “Canada is too large for any writer.”

He nods.

“Yes, perhaps. Yugoslavia was too small. Canada is too big,” he concurs. “But there is more, I think. The question is more complicated.”

“What is the question?”

“Yes. I don’t know,” he says. “Maybe it is something I cannot say. I will try.” And he does, but it takes him ten minutes to find his words, and even then he apologizes for not being clear. “There is more I want to say, but I cannot. I am different here.” And he taps the table

with his fist. “In London, I am a different person. I find it hard to talk about what I know how to talk about. I am confusing you, I know, but I am confusing myself as well. The world changes, you see? We are not the same. Time changes us. Place changes us. These are things I did not understand when I left my village.”

Donna reaches under the table and pulls her camera out of her bag. Peter glances at her as she attaches her flash, but he keeps talking. Donna trains the camera on him, fiddles with the light meter and adjusts the aperture.

“What I want to know,” he says, “is what you think of Alice Munro. I want to know about Canada. How do you live together? I am the son of a farmer. Now I live in the city. I do not know how to live any more. My country does not exist. Many things are possible, but I feel like I cannot move. There is a word for this. I feel –”

“Paralyzed,” I say, and at that moment Donna takes his picture. The flash explodes and the patrons grumble.

“Hey. We’ll have none of that,” demands the bartender.

“Sorry,” says Donna.

But Peter continues. “Paralyzed, yes,” he says, undisturbed by the flash. As if it hadn’t happened. “I am stopped. I am in the past. The future is far away. I feel like I will never get there. I want to know about Canada because you have vision. You see in life new ways.”

“That’s flattering,” I say.

But he insists he’s serious.

I hesitate. Too long, perhaps. His face drops, the expectation drained out of it.

“I told him about Australia,” Donna interrupts. “I told him about you. He wanted to meet you, so I suggested he come today.”

“Oh, I see,” I say. “You should have warned me. I would have prepared something.”

“I’m not sure I can help,” I say to Peter. “I don’t know much about Alice Munro.”

“It’s not about her,” he says.

“I know.”

He nods and glances at his watch.

“It’s okay,” he says after a moment. “I must go now. We will meet again, I think. And I will be more clear next time.”

And he pushes his chair back, stands up and strides to the bar to pay for his lunch.

DONNA AND I MET in Prague. I was teaching English. She was passing through. We shared a coffee in a cafe and she asked me about good sites to photograph around the city. My teaching term was drawing to a close, so we made plans to travel together. A week later, one of my students gave me a bottle of wine. Homemade, he said. From his family in the country. That evening I gave Donna a walking tour of my neighbourhood. She talked about her travels and the book she hoped to make out of her photographs. I told her about my

students and the stories I had heard about life before the Velvet Revolution. I made a point of mentioning the wine, and she agreed to share it. We talked through the night, exploring. Layer after layer fell away, each labyrinth was resolved. In the moments before the dawn, the last puzzle toppled.

“Look, Daniel, the sun.”

“I see it,” I said, stroking her face. Such a face. The new day reflected off her cheeks. Words had been spilt by the thousands. Our bodies at last exposed. We rolled into bed, wrapped ourselves around each other, sucked and touched, nuzzled and caressed. Later we would board trains, tour museums, sleep in discarded discos, lunch on the Left Bank, fuck in a field in the south of France as the sun set and the world turned and the emerging stars signalled what seemed only too clearly to be the clockwork perfection of the universe.

Donna documented our journey. A film school dropout and

daughter of a clergyman, she loved her camera. Light and silver, she said. That's all she needed. If the pen is mightier than the sword, and a picture is worth a thousand words, well, we know who wins. Through her viewfinder, the world spoke to her. She saw photographs before they happened, like a hockey player who anticipates the play and passes the puck to where his teammate isn't, but will be soon. She watched scenes develop and placed herself where she needed to be. *Click!* And she had the story. *Click!* The magic could be transformed, reproduced, shared. It took me a long time to see what Donna saw, and I'm sure that I never understood it all. She used to point at people. "Look at him, the man across the street. Waiting at the bus stop. I wonder where he's going?" Everyone had a story, a future, a past. She had a way of seeing the potential in people and amplifying it, making them seem larger than they were. Every life was enormous to her, every anecdote significant. I had spent nearly a year in Europe, running away from school, escaping my disillusionment,

and she refuelled me. Her passion allowed me to move beyond my professors and their theories and reconnect to life. Sounds grandiose, I know. But after two years at one of the top universities in the country, I felt myself sinking in a sea of abstractions – and Donna’s photography allowed me to see the concrete in the world around me. The solids, the eternal, in the mutability of the everyday.

“PETER’S FRIENDS have a darkroom,” she says, completing the story of the night before. We linger in the Unicorn over coffee and cigarettes. I’m glad to have her alone.

“You should see my shots,” she says. “I got some great ones of you.”

I ask her to show me, but she says she left them back at the house. She left her things there. She has to go back. She asks me if I remember Amsterdam. I nod.

“By the wharf?”

“Yes.”

“I have a shot of you looking out over the harbour.” She’s smiling and looking at me. “It’s good,” she says, gleaming. Our knees touch under the table. “I like what it says about you. So calm, so deep, contemplative, complex. So cute, too.” She laughs. Last night was the first night we had spent apart since we left Prague. I want to tell her how much I missed her, how I dreamed about her cheeks, how I’d forgotten how beautiful she was. But I don’t. I want to lean across the table and kiss her. But I don’t do that either. I want to ask her about our future. For six weeks we have been living in the present. No troubles, no temptation. Every second a work of art. But a space has opened between us. The current has skipped a beat. It sounds stupid. We were apart less than twenty-four hours. Not even a complete rotation of the planet, but for a month and a half we have functioned as one organism, and last night I felt her peel away from me. *Donna, come back*, I want to say, but she would scold me for being melodramatic. *Here I am, sweetheart. Here I am, lover. Right here before you. I’m not*

going anywhere. I'm right here for you, my love.

We leave the pub. The bombed crust of the bus is still sitting like a gravestone in the middle of the street. People pass it on the sidewalk, but few turn to look.

We make our way to the National Gallery, and I see Trafalgar Square for the first time. I can't get over it. Pigeons clamour over tourists. Millions of birds chase after bread crumbs. A towering monument, guarded by four enormous lions, points to the sky. "Who's the guy at the top?" Donna asks. But I don't know. "Wellington," someone says, tapping me on the shoulder. "Defeated Napoleon, he did. We'd all be speaking French, if he hadn't." On the far side of the square stands Canada House. I see a Canadian flag and salute. Donna howls.

"Go chase some pigeons," she says. She pulls her camera out and tells me to run into the flock. But before I can move a bird hops onto my shoulder.

Click! Click!

Donna's caught that one.

"Now run," she says. And I do. I dash into a crowd of pigeons and the birds rush into the air in a flurry of flapping wings. But they don't go far, and they're soon replaced.

Then Donna commands me to lie down. "On the ground. Face up." And as I follow out her command, she buys some birdseed off a vendor, which she sprinkles across me, head to foot. Quickly, I'm covered in pigeons, poking at my clothes, digging their pointy toes into my chest and arms.

Click! Click!

Donna's recorded everything.

I roll over and pull myself up on one knee just before a pigeon jumps onto my face. Donna grins and brushes birdseed out of my hair.

"Thanks, Daniel," she says.

I stand up and hug her. She buries her face in my neck. The world disappears.

LATER, WE MEET Peter.

We are on our way to St. John's Wood to pick up Donna's things, when we see him on the other side of the street in the company of two young men. Americans, it turns out. John Kennedy and George Washington. Two Presidents reincarnated. Donna waves to them, but they don't see us. As we get closer, we realize that the Americans are supporting Peter, holding him up by his elbows. All three are stone drunk.

Peter sees us first. He looks up, then lurches into the street, calling Donna's name.

"My God," I say, as an approaching car slams on its brakes, narrowly missing Peter.

Peter waves at the driver, who is lying on his horn.

"Donna, Donna," he says, staggering towards her.

Then he throws his arms around her and plants a kiss on her cheek. John and George follow behind him, holding hands. Donna pushes

herself away from Peter and says, “Come, we better get you home.” She turns him around and leads him in the direction he came from.

I assume that John and George are the friends that Peter is staying with, but they laugh at the suggestion. They are Peter’s neighbours, they say. Their parents, all four sets of them – “One of the benefits of divorce is that the bowl is that much deeper” – have rented a house for the pair in London for the year. “To see how we like it, you know. Living together and all.” They were Harvard students who fell in love. “But life is too short to spend your best years in school, don’t you think?” Donna and Peter lead the way, his arm draped over her shoulders. I try to start a conversation with John and George, but they are full of inside jokes. Everything I say produces a comment and a snicker, and soon we are walking in silence, John and George trading glances, Peter whispering in Donna’s ear.

The house where Peter is staying turns out to be substantially larger than I had imagined. A willow tree fills the front yard. A colourful

garden brightens the front of the house. Peter unlocks the door and ushers us in. The hardwood floor appear freshly polished. The walls are decorated with paintings. John and George disappear into the kitchen. Peter directs me into the front room, then remains in the hall with Donna. I interest myself in the books that line three of the walls and find leather-bound first editions of Dickens and Austen. Something's happening here, but I don't know what. John and George appear with a decanter of whiskey and a bucket of ice.

“Have they gone upstairs?” George asks.

“You know they have,” says John, dumping ice into three glasses and pouring the whiskey. Then he turns to me. “You’re going to lose that girl,” he says in a mock-serious tone, and stops pouring suddenly, realizing what he’s said. “That’s a Beatles’ line, isn’t it?” He looks at me, but when I don’t respond, he glances at George for confirmation. “You know. (He sings,) ‘You’re going to lose that girl, yes, yes, you’re going to lose that girl. You’re going to loo-oo-oose that, lose that girl.’

Oh, forget it.”

George laughs. For some reason, he finds this hilariously funny. He holds his sides and chuckles, but he can't hold it in, and he's soon leaning back in his chair overcome by giggles.

“What's the matter with you?” John says, but he can hardly keep himself from laughing, too. “This is a serious moment. A tragedy is brewing.” He turns to me and again adopts his mock-serious tone. “Young man, it is necessary that we discuss certain particulars.” But he can't maintain his posture. He attempts a sip of whiskey, but he laughs and coughs it back up.

“Step back a moment in your mind's eye,” he advises me. “A young couple, a pair of queers, a third gentleman. Consider the possibilities. No, wait. Consider the point of view of the queers. Hell, George,” he turns to his partner. “We should just tell him. The dramatic irony is killing me.”

George puts his hand on his chin and adopts a pose of intense lis-

tening. “Right you are,” he says eventually. “But have you considered the consequences. He may be a raving lunatic inside that calm exterior. The serial murderer type, John. Have you factored my safety into your moral responsibility?”

“Bullocks,” says John. “Let’s ask him, shall we?”

“Right,” says George, addressing me. “Are you the serial killer type, then?”

“No,” I say.

“Good,” says George. And I suddenly realize that they’re talking in English accents.

But before they can tell me any more, Donna emerges from the doorway, bag in hand.

“I’ve got my stuff, Daniel,” she says. She surveys the room and the smirks embedded on the faces of my companions.

“Nice meeting you two,” she says as I pass her and head for the door.

“Double your pleasure,” I hear John say. “I don’t know why I said

that.” Then there is a burst of giggles, and Donna pushes me down the stairs and along the front walk. We’re halfway across the street before she says anything.

“Do you know what he said to me?”

I confess ignorance.

“He said that he was in love with me. Grand, isn’t it? Isn’t that fucking grand.” Then she waits for me to say something, but I don’t, and she lets out a deep sigh, and turns away from me.

“I’m sure that you don’t understand any of this,” she says.

“You’re right,” I say. And suddenly I realize that we’re standing in front of the Beatles’ Abbey Road studios and I’m staring at the crosswalk that graces the cover of the group’s last studio album. I stop and point. “We’re here.” And Donna looks, too. She lowers her pack off her shoulder and digs for her camera.

“Take your shoes and socks off and walk across,” she says. “Like Paul did.” But I don’t. I just stand and stare at the crosswalk. White lines

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painted in foot-wide bands spread across the road. I can hardly make sense of it. Nothing holds together. And I'm a long way from home.

About the Author



MICHAEL BRYSON's first collection of short fiction, *Thirteen Shades of Black and White*, will appear in October 1999 from Turnstone Press (<http://www.turnstonepress.com>). Bryson has published fiction and poetry in over a dozen Canadian literary journals, including *The Antigonish Review*, *Event*, *The New Quarterly*, *Ink* and *The Backwater Review*. Samples can be found on Michael's web site: <http://www.michaelbryson.com>.

Bryson is also the publisher of *The Danforth Review*, a new online literary magazine featuring fiction, poetry and reviews (www.michaelbryson.com/danforth). Bryson has written reviews for *Quill & Quire*, *The Kitchener-Waterloo Record* and *Id Magazine*.

