

Paper Boats

Paul J. Rogers

Human beings are malleable and vodka should be banned. Perestroika Vodka definitely should be banned (without question), and everyone has something they dislike about themselves (if they're honest). Those thoughts, more or less, had strobed underneath each eyelid as Nikki Baxter had woken to the world this morning. She'd then vomited her morning coffee and gone back to bed.

Her latest attempt at getting up was proving more fruitful. Seated at the kitchen table, a towel wound around her head after showering, she spun the coffee dregs inside her cup. (That coffee, by the way, was a fresh cup, the contents of the first having left the house via the plumbing several hours ago as mentioned.) She reached for her phone and then an eyebrow arched as she examined the browser.

Many tabs were open, which she then closed. (Everything from the discography of Depeche Mode to a list of Fiat Group assembly plants.) She had no memory of visiting those websites, each tab a perfect little mystery. This sizeable hole in her recall was hardly surprising considering how much she'd been drinking lately. The latest binge alone, with naps in between, had spanned three nights.

She gave her phone a couple of taps to launch a satellite map, zooming in on Parting Gut, a small drainage channel that fed into the tributary at Vange Creek, itself running into Holehaven Creek before fanning out into the River Thames. Pitsea seemed like the easiest place to get down to the water as the road ran alongside the creek. But, for some reason, Parting Gut was rattling round inside her brain. Perhaps she'd been there as a kid? That was it. Most likely. Parting Gut it was then – even if it was a tricky place to get to from this house.

For the last thirty-four years this house had been her mother's but now it belonged to her. It'd come as a real shock when she'd passed away last month as she'd seemed in good health. Besides, sixty-seven wasn't very old. Such is life, and death, Nikki supposed. And with death came paperwork, including the freehold to 86 The Gore, although the place needed a bit of work. The estate agent, Perry Pennebaker, reckoned it'd fetch a hundred and fifty thousand once she'd decorated and put in central heating. Right now, though, she wasn't even sure that she wanted to sell. One thing she was sure about was that she'd never be going back to London.

As recently as a month ago, if someone had said she'd quit her job and move back to Basildon then she'd have said they were stark raving bonkers. Okay, she hadn't actually decided to move back here yet. Neither had she officially quit her job. But

having only called them once since her mum had passed, that'd most likely taken care of itself.

Schtum Records, Brick Lane, London – once the darling of the indie scene yet now barely scraping by on their back catalogue. It said in her contract she was the “in-house designer” (no mention of writing emails and answering the phone all day). Schtum. An unremarkable little planet orbiting a fading star – everything in this particular universe held together by the dark matter of hype, self-mythology and bullshit. Still, none of that mattered now.

Unsure how long she'd been zoning out on that stack of *Daily Mirrors*, she lifted her eyes back to her phone. The alerts were turned off and she hadn't checked her messages for days. The letting agency might've been trying to get in touch, let her know when she had to move her stuff out. If it wasn't for her deposit it wouldn't have mattered as she couldn't give a toss about the things she'd left inside that flat. No text messages or voicemails, though. A few missed calls from the solicitor. That was it.

The vodka bottle was winking at her through a glass panel in the kitchen cabinet, so she moved it to the fridge where it should've been put last night. A pair of thumbs then hooked inside hip pockets. Everything in this place needed ripping out. The lino was so ancient it might've once been used by breakdancers for headspins and whatnot. A quick shuffle through to the living room, wall-to-wall carpet, oatmeal once but now mostly brown. These walls – great meadows of chintzy flowers: it was like the set of a nineties sitcom that'd been lived in and gone rotten. She sunk into the sofa, which was upholstered in damask, was now a little worn and had always been quite hideous.

Her headache came roaring back. What a shambles. The drinking had to stop. And it would. She'd make sure of it. Yet throughout this lost month there'd been some moments: not everything had been self-destructive vice. Take yesterday, for example. Something interesting had happened on the way to the shops. At least, she thought it had.

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After getting off the phone with Pennebaker, she'd nipped out for Nurofen and a bit of fresh air to clear her head. The weather was fine – a real scorcher – and before she knew it she found herself in Laindon on the other side of Victoria Park. This little car, a Fiat 500 in Pasodoble Red, was hands down the best thing in her life right now. Strangers would sometimes smile at her, and everyone seemed to give it a second glance.

She wasn't sure why she'd driven this far for headache pills but she had and now she needed a smoke. After indicating, she pulled into the empty space outside Clarke's News. This newsagent's, she remembered, used to be a Martins. Martins Newsagents had sprung up all over Basildon in the decade since she'd left. It seemed odd that they'd sell one of their shops to a competitor. Perhaps the location wasn't up to much?

A Range Rover slowed to a crawl alongside, window gliding down, a suntanned geezer then leering at her from inside. If he hadn't been wearing mascara she might've guessed he was a builder (neck and forearms), or an estate agent (car), or, perhaps, a tanning salon manager (orange hue). But he *was* wearing mascara (which was running), and now he was pulling a revolting grin. Out popped his bald head, scalp shining, and he shouted, "Oi, oi! Vada the dolly polone."

Was that Polari?

She couldn't be sure as the car alarm going off had mostly drowned him out. He turned left, an arm half-raised as if bidding her adieu. Her flattened palm then pushed the door glass and a bell rang.

"Ten Benson, please," she said to the woman at the till, mind still on that Range Rover and whether or not the owner ran the Punch & Judy show in Southend. Then came a twinge of self-reproach. Since her mum had passed she'd been trying to give up ciggies but it wasn't working out so well. (Her mum, never a smoker, had died of acute liver failure so the two things weren't connected.)

The old girl – for some reason, wearing flip-up sunglasses with the lenses set at right angles – put the change on top of *The Sun* and returned to watching *Ramsay's Kitchen Nightmares* on Channel 4. It seemed like years since she'd been in a newsagent's although as a smoker in constant need of nicotine she knew that to be impossible. Either way, the smell of newsprint was taking away her breath. As her eyes came to rest on the pile of *Daily Mirrors*, she felt her lip wobble.

Ever since she could remember, her mum had always read the *'Mirror*. And now it all came flooding back: Brian Reade's weekly column, "The 3 a.m. Girls", Oliver Holt on the sports pages and that ridiculous fucking cartoon, *Andy Capp*. Eyes misting over, she turned her back on the old bat in flip-up sunspecs.

This was no good. Over the last month, she'd barely left the house. All that take-away food, the home-delivered groceries, her only human contact being the odd trip out for cigarettes and vodka after dark. So far she hadn't actually sobbed while sober. Well, not in public at least.

Time was standing still again.

It'd been doing that a lot lately and while the seconds froze she thought about

that house. So much had happened there over the years, yet now nothing moved inside those walls. The Cadbury's Cream Eggs looked inviting, but she'd already had a Twix so far today. Three in fact. She didn't have a tissue so she dabbed her eye with a fingertip. It was pathetic to be a wreck like this. Mum was gone and she wasn't coming back.

"Take a copy of the *'Mirror* as well," she said as she placed a box of Nurofen on the counter. Old "flip-ups" rolled her eyes, like taking her money was too much of a chore. Pills pocketed, newspaper folded and wedged in her armpit crook, the doorbell sounded and her skin tingled as she stepped outside. It was nippy for the time of year. No doubt about it.

Pavement cracks, like broken veins, and then she lifted her eyes towards her car. But hold on a minute: who was that bloke? And what was he doing by her car? He wasn't from round here. She knew that much. He was wearing leather trousers and his hair was greased up, although not in an undercut like she'd noticed all the lads in town had. He was tanned as well – by the sun, not on a sunbed or out of a bottle. She stood scowling, hands on hips, as he squatted by her rear bumper inspecting this and that.

"Can I help you?"

He pushed up to his feet. "Yes."

No doubt about it. He wasn't from round here, that single misconstrued utterance also containing traces of an accent. He looked Mediterranean, possibly Spanish, although she'd known right away he was Italian. One thing for sure, those sideburns would never fly over here except perhaps in Camden. She stared at him in a manner intended to convey *c'mon then, spit it out*.

"I need some informations," he said, before consulting a notebook and reading off a Basildon address.

It didn't take a (former) music industry employee to grasp the significance of the address he was asking for. Everyone in Basildon knew 54 Bonnygate. Dave Gahan had grown up there before he'd become a global superstar. This bloke in leathers, most likely an Italian, was a Depeche Mode Devotee. Which was disappointing as he was pretty fit. He repeated the question, 54 Bonnygate and whether she knew it.

"Well, it ain't in my car boot, is it?" She felt bad after saying that but it was too late now.

His eyes narrowed and then he flicked his head towards her motor. "Your car?" She nodded. "Fiat *meccanico*, Potenza, Italia," his fist pounding two beats across his heart. "We have the big factory in Basilicata."

There you go: Italian. At school, she'd had a stupid fantasy about moving to

Genoa, so she'd tried to learn the language from some CDs. Apart from "hello" and "goodbye", the only thing she could remember was the idiom "*ubriaco come una scimmia*". And that translated as "drunk as a monkey". It now dawned on her that he might've been trying to tell her he worked at the factory that'd made her car so she relayed that as a question.

"No," he said, hands chopping air. "Fiat factory in Melfi, sixty kilometre from Potenza."

"Right," she said. "That's where they make the five-door hatchback version. These days, all the four-doors come from Poland."

The guy took off his sunglasses, big aviators, and then breathed on the lenses. "Fucking globalisation, huh?"

He then offered her his hand to shake, which she just stared at. As he wasn't giving up, she freed her right arm crook of the newspaper and shook, although not before bobbing a satirical courtesy and then tossing back her head with a giggle.

"Alf," he said, still not letting go of her hand. "My families call me 'Fredo' but that ain't cool, okay?"

"Wrigley," she said, borrowing the name from one of Schtum's acts. (They were freak-folk and they sucked but also suitably obscure.) After a couple more seconds she pulled her hand free. "Depeche Mode fan, right?"

"How you know?"

Put it this way, he was hardly the first. She'd heard about these pilgrimages to Basildon at James Hornsby High, but this whole thing had likely been going on since before she'd formed inside her mother's womb. Depeche Mode fans were probably responsible for a good percentage of the town's tourism. They were also, most likely, the only people who ever visited Basildon willingly.

She ignored his question as the answer was obvious, telling him instead that he was in the wrong part of town. She then asked which bus he'd caught to get here and he said the 8A.

"Well, there ain't any cab firms round here so you'll have to get back on it. Go back to Basildon Bus Station. After that, ask someone else because I don't know the bus numbers anymore."

The Italian, the Devotee – Alf – put both hands together in an approximation of a Buddhist bow. He then hooked a backpack strap over one shoulder and shuffled off. She waited a moment before pointing the key fob towards her car and then the lights flashed twice as the alarm disarmed.

Leather creaked as she leaned back in her seat. And then she angled the

rear-view mirror so she could see him. He was heading in the wrong direction now, past the florist's, hands in pockets. She shook her head. Getting lost must be part of the life of a roving Devotee, she presumed.

Her thoughts then turned to her face, now in view after a quick tilt of the mirror. Not a pretty sight. Even if she had put on a little slap this morning. She'd needed it as well as her eyes had looked like a giant panda's. The eyeliner still looked okay but underneath her foundation you could make out the spots she'd been trying to cover. Spots that'd appeared these last few weeks after hammering her liver every night with Perestroika.

She tilted the mirror back towards the street, at him, Alf, the Italian. Now things were looking up because having realised his mistake he'd turned around. But then he started to cross the street. If he caught the bus on that side, he'd end up by Pasadena's Nite Club in South Fields. God knows why she even cared. If he was stupid enough to come all this way to look at a house then he got what he deserved, right?

Besides, what was she going to do – offer to drive him to Bonnygate? He could be anyone. And now that Mum was no longer around there was nobody she could call to explain her whereabouts. She could phone a mate, she supposed, but anyone she'd want to call was in London so that wasn't much help. The only person round here she could think of was her half-sister, Joanne, although she hadn't even called to offer her condolences.

A bus pulled up and Alf got on it. That was it, then. Fate had intervened. Then he got off again, the driver taking a moment to help him out no doubt. If it was fate that he'd got on then it must be fate that he'd got off again as well. And you can't argue with fate, she reasoned. She turned over the ignition, checked her mirrors and pulled a U-turn.

A few seconds later, the window slid down, driver's side. "Just realised I'm heading that way. Hop in if you like."

"Fifty-four Bonnygate?"

She nodded. He grinned and darted round the bonnet, passenger door then opening and closing with a thud. After dumping his backpack in the footwell, he mumbled something in Italian. Going by that big smile he was thanking his lucky stars for the lift – as well he should.

"Seatbelt, please." She then stared at him until he'd fastened it. In the moments following her decision to pick him up, she'd wondered what the vibe would be like and whether or not he'd talk. He'd seemed gregarious back there on the street, but she now worried that he'd freeze up after he'd snagged a ride. She'd also wondered whether he'd

think she was coming on to him, which she absolutely was not. It wasn't that he was unattractive. But just look at all that rock garb. If she'd met him in a bar in London, she'd never have given him a second glance. Anyway, she needn't have worried about him clamming up because so far Alf hadn't stopped talking.

They'd only been driving ten minutes, yet he'd covered a surprising range of topics. (In no particular order): the benefits of washing a car by hand, protecting paintwork with a cover; children's urine didn't usually smell because their kidneys were so healthy; how some scumbag had screamed at him at Victoria Station (Brexit, most likely). After all that, they'd talked about her artwork. Not once had he mentioned Depeche Mode.

She turned into Bonnygate, checking off the numbers on her side of the street. She'd been here once before, when she was a teenager, and everything was as she remembered: just small semidetached houses on a quiet street. She pulled into an empty space.

"This is it?" he said, breaking into a grin. "Crazy, huh? Which one?"

She motioned to the one with the big tree in the garden before offering to wait around. To be honest, she didn't fancy his chances dressed like that round here, although she kept that to herself.

He smiled. "Wrigley. That make me so happy, but I don't need no ride to the station. I want some time here, see?"

Fair enough, then. She'd be on her way. "What will you do here?" she said, lifting her feet back off the pedals. "I'm curious."

"Take photo for my blog," he said as he unhooked his seatbelt. He then produced his iPhone as if offering it up as proof.

"Makes sense," she said. "You run a fan club back in Italy or something?"

Alf took off his sunglasses and looked at her. "Something bothering me about you, Wrigley. Now I'm gonna spill, okay?"

His lashes were long, she now noticed. Although he'd got sleepy dust caught in some of them.

"You got some kinda big fucking problem, right?" he said, raising his cuff to his eye and giving it a rub. "So I'm gonna say about my grandfather. No, he ain't my grandfather, he my grandfather's fucking papa. How you say?"

"Great-grandfather."

"Okay, *sì*. Anyhow, this some kind of crazy family legend so listen good. My grandmother told me this story, okay?"

She told him to hang on a moment and then reached for the Bensons. She'd

never smoked inside her car before but right now it wasn't an option. She then offered one to Alf, which he took, and as the windows rolled down the sultry air (tinged with lady's bedstraw) collided with the smell of freshly lit cigarettes. Alf then started to explain how his great-grandfather, who went by the surname "Ginesta", would sometimes make paper boats.

Following his story wasn't easy because of his English, although it was a million times better than her Italian, which, of course, she'd studied for a short time many years ago and then quit. As his tale unfolded, she'd occasionally check Google for bits of vocabulary to help him along, and the stripped down version went something like this: Old Man Ginesta hadn't had an easy life. Modest with a big heart, he'd often been disappointed by life and people. And this would eat away at him. And so, when something was bothering him, he'd take a sheet of butcher's paper and make a paper boat. After that, he'd write down what was vexing him in the cavity inside the hull. It could've been anything – a person, a situation, or something he'd done he regretted – and always one problem per boat. (Alf made that part very clear.) Ginesta would then launch his little boat in the River Basento, perhaps mumbling a few words about how his burden had been lifted. After that he'd cross himself a few times, wish it safe passage and hope that it made it to the sea, which, she guessed, would've been the Ionian.

Alf put his sunglasses back on, one knee up on the dash, and she thought about his story for a while. It was a pretty good one, she supposed. But she had no idea why he'd told it to her. There was the language barrier, of course, so maybe something important had been lost. Even so, he'd picked up on her grief although she didn't know how. His story certainly seemed to fit her current mood, yet just as certainly it didn't seem to offer anything that was tangible.

Alf opened the passenger door and pulled himself out with the handrail. "Nice ride." He popped his head back inside briefly, "*Ciao.*"

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Nikki parked herself on the kitchen chair, which was wooden, faux-folksy and weighed half what you'd imagine. Carefully, by the fingertips, she picked up the paper boat she'd made this morning. Making boats was easy enough although this high-stern, elongated-bow shape that she liked had taken a while to get right. On top of her waste paper basket were a couple of failed attempts. This particular one, however, had turned out all right, and after breaking for some beans on toast she'd then waterproofed the hull in coloured crayon.

She'd hit upon this boat idea last night (propelled, of course, by Perestroika), and her mind had then raced about the different things she'd like to write inside. Last night, she'd even scribbled down a list. Certain people kept cropping up, half a dozen names in fact. But, after sleeping on it, she'd come to the conclusion she would simply cut them from her life instead. She was grateful to the boat for that as it would've never occurred to her otherwise. After all, many of these people were close – almost family. Now, however, she could see they were choking her. They probably never meant it. In most cases, at least. Nevertheless, they were.

There were other things on her list as well as people. (While scanning it again now, she was struggling to read her own handwriting.) As her eye sped down, she snorted. Many of these things were ridiculous although “MDMA powder”, the expression “You're welcome”, and “Cheddar & Sour Cream Pringles” made her smile. She balled the paper, an old flyer, and launched it towards the bin. It was a perfect shot, barely rustling the plastic liner.

An idea came: the word “grief” now spelling out in felt pen on the whiteboard in her mind. But before it'd had time to germinate a new thought came and pushed it aside and this new idea was “yourself”. She wrote both words on yesterday's *Mirror*, deciding “grief” to be impossible before the ink had even dried. She then focused her attention on herself, Nikki Baxter.

Pacing the lino, she wondered what it meant to discard your identity. Was it like killing-off a character in a book, one of the many deaths in *A Game of Thrones*? With Nikki Baxter out the picture she could start again – new name, new place, cut her hair short and get a new style of dress. But as she tried to focus on the details it began to make her head spin.

One boat per idea.

She didn't know where the thought had come from, but it seemed like a good way to go.

Chair legs scraped lino and she was back at the *Mirror*, now officially a notepad. Stacked on the end of the table were a month's worth as she hadn't got round to cancelling the paperboy yet. Along with some flyers, today's was still on the doormat. Each day, at some point, she'd leaf through the paper – Oliver Holt, Brian Reade, *Andy Capp*. This one though had not yet been opened, until now. She turned to a new page, the crossword. *Things I don't like About Myself*, she wrote in the margin at the top.

The fridge seal opened with a squelch, Perestroika flat on the middle shelf. Today, so far, had been a good one as she'd only once unscrewed the cap. It took all her strength to close the fridge and leave the bottle lying prone. Her boat, at the centre of

the kitchen table, caught her eye. The turquoise accent on the hull really popped. She returned her gaze to the newspaper, mind blank, a restless hand now reaching for her phone.

Going by this map, Parting Gut was some distance from the bus stops. The other option was to call a cab but the driver would most likely ask what she was doing and all that crap. It would've been so much easier if she'd had a car. Then again, how many times in her life had she thought that? Still, the fact remained that she'd failed her test as a teenager and had never been behind the wheel again since.

Parting Gut. She imagined its muddy banks before picturing the spot where she'd launch her boat on the waning tide. As it sailed, she'd wish it safe passage in the hope it would be carried to a place where they couldn't read English, should it ever be found.

Poetic stuff. But what the dickens was she going to put inside?

And then it came to her. Now she'd got it. Now she knew what she was going to write. She unpicked the folds until the boat was flat, and then her felt pen popped as she took off the cap.