

The Best of Bugged – August 15th

At a price
Lynsey May

Look at you with your complementary mixtures of auburns and browns, your practical haircut and your larger than necessary wedding band. I'm waiting for you to have the chance to judge me. I don't want to give that to you. But at the same time a small, and probably perverse, part of me wants to see the stutter on your tongue and a faint blush scudding across your cheeks.

I would have walked right past you if you hadn't had the presence of mind to step into my path. But, yes, isn't it funny that we've run into each other like this. One of those things I do agree. But if we were going to run into each other then this would surely be the street to do it on. And thank you ever so much for your compliments on my dress last night. Thank goodness you are the type that's far too polite to ask how I managed to get my hands on such an exclusive design. I know you know how exclusive, I could see that in the way your eyes skated from it to my face when I handed over my coat.

I should really decline your invite for coffee, but you're pressing me so warmly that you're doing a good job of hiding your loneliness. My hands are cold and I don't have another engagement until much later. I let you bustle me along, It feels as though your hand is affixed to my elbow, pushing me forward but when I look, it is casually pushing your shiny hair behind the ridge of your shoulder. I feel like giving you a nod of admiration but instead I answer your questions about the shops we are passing. Yes, I have been there, depressing selection I agree. Yes, terribly limited indeed. But aren't we lucky that there are all these shops to choose from in the first place and that we are the type of people able to afford the choice?

Of course I think Brian is handsome, in an unusual kind of way. You're right, I would hardly be seeing him if I didn't think so. You ask me question after question about him but you never wait for the answers, instead you flay me with information about your husband. I'm not sure what it is that you are looking for. I try to judge from what you say about Brian, what he may have said about me. I have moved in and around lives like yours and I feel you should be easy to know inside and out, but

I have to admit that there is something about your incessant chatter that intrigues me.

I'm sure I want my coffee black thank you, no it's not to lose weight, but thank you again for telling me that I don't need to. It's merely that I am not fond of milk. Of course I don't think any less of you because you've ordered a latte and asked them to only put half a shot of espresso in it – plenty of people have problems with caffeine.

I'd assumed I knew why we ended up in this sweet little café, I've had plenty of women looking out for their good, good friends in much the same way. Sometimes I avoid it, other times I let them talk – it makes them feel better about themselves. But as you fidget with the spoon, the sugar, the pale, beige foam of your coffee, I wonder if you have another reason. Maybe you are about to warn me, many men warrant a warning for one reason or another.

We exchange wry smiles as a baby begins to scream and I reassure you when you ask me not to judge you, but you just can't stand babies. I feel much the same way and I look at you anew, surprised that you have surprised me and you are sitting there rattling away, not really trying to find my secrets out but making me uncomfortable anyway.

You have something I don't have, and it's not the kind of thing that I covet but when I think of it I am uncomfortable. You smile at me and tell me I am beautiful and it is a strange thing to hear from a woman when there is no jealousy below it.

I'm not sure I need another coffee but it's too late, you are ordering more. I look at the flush at your collarbone and decide to go. Fuck Brian, he's a lousy tipper anyway.

I don't suppose Brian ever did tell you what I do for a living? I say sweetly, already gathering up my handbag and gloves. I guess not, it's hardly the kind of thing he'd want to admit to

You lean in towards me, still clutching your spoon and your voice is lower and slower than I've heard it.

I knew of course, you say, he didn't need to tell. What I need to know now though is, how much do you cost?

Why children's librarians shouldn't work alone.

Emma Purshouse

Thursday. Mid morning, mid term.

There are no children here
just their stories and the silence.

The librarian re-reads Snow White
because once upon a time
this had been her favourite book,

this book where mirrors talk
and mothers order hearts of little girls
to be ripped out and eaten.

In the peripheries of vision,
shadows move amongst the shelves.
And draughts cause hairs to rise

on napes of necks. Nervous fingers
fidget through a well-cut bob
like bony combs. And panic

laces up the stays too tightly.
Fight or flight? She grabs the phone,
hisses out a cry for help,

I'm on my own! Dwarves, princes,
Christine from reference;
she doesn't care who comes to save her.

In the staff room, relieved, but still
on high alert, she eyes the apple
in her lunch box with suspicion.

Grief
Sara-Jane Arbury

It woke me up this morning.
Naughty.
It knows it's not allowed on the bed.

Watched me all through breakfast.
Those hang-dog eyes.
No tit-bits. It'll get fat.

It keeps nudging me. Bumping its
nose against my knee. Once
it licked my hand.

I throw a stick to get rid of it.
But it brings it back, wanting more.
It won't leave me alone.

It teases me. Rolls over and
plays dead. Then gets up again.
Whines for attention.

I can't help stroking it.
Making a pet of it.
It owns me.

Could you resist it? Could you?
With its offer of love?
Limitless love?

Overheard on Gyllingvase Beach
Marilyn Francis

You said it never snows in Cornwall.
Just like that. No argument. Never snows.
Along Gyllingvase beach the sky turned black.
I heard a swimmer say, 'the water's andsome in December
it's only when your teeth get cold it's too late.'

At night we huddled in your sister's single bed as ice spread
over the inside of the windows and our breath froze over the counterpane
and only the sea stirred in the polar bear darkness.

Road Trip

Janet Rogerson

Driving through the desert you see a sign peppered with bullet holes,
then you hear those bullets hitting that sign – and that's the brain.
In a moment a whole picture paints itself into your consciousness –
the perps, the car, the girl, (with two possible hairstyles),
a Stetson on the backseat, Metallica on the radio,
and tiny cubes of ice dying in a centimetre of warm cola.
A tumbleweed rolls quickly by, then leaves through the back door
to your left, with a dismissal note reading too Hollywood.

Then, 10 years on you see a photograph of a sign with bullet holes,
another car, with a baby in the back seat,
a warning of snow and a decision to choose a lesser Canyon.
You see a drive-in movie, with just three cars and The Beach.
See the beginning of a road-trip that you are only part way through,
with multiple endings that you shuffle like a bogus fortune-teller.
You wonder where the shooters are now? You wonder if they are?
And that too, is the brain.

OVERDRAFT LIMIT

Susie Wild

I am not going to spend
 £4
on a giant
 pencil.
I am made of money
but I draw the line
 at that.
With a small pencil.
That didn't cost £4.

[*Overheard: The Hayward Gallery Shop, August 2010]

What Friends Are For
Rob A. Mackenzie

"First, the friend who trashed my flat. Then the friend who stole my TV. Now the council say I'm deliberately trying to make myself homeless." – man on mobile phone, July 2010

The grey, the concrete and canal,
the skyscraper trowelling
among stray flakes of cloud

so high residents laugh off
plans for neighbourhood watch
and instead wreck the lift.

The stairs are concrete,
the top sixteen flights
abstractions from street level,

who would climb so high?
Unopened envelopes litter
the lobby, mushrooms flourish

on every balcony – here,
lives become so self-contained
even we feel the urge

to knock for admittance,
but why bother when under
the guise of friendship

your ground floor flat can be
trashed and television ditched –
a demonstration of lightweight

humour, nothing serious,
just laughter in twilight
among friends. Take

the extra points and scuttle
up the housing ladder. Never
forget what we do for you.

Snap
Jude D'Souza

"...And if you need any more proof it's not a romantic thing, her grandmother might joining us." I tell Rob indignantly before hanging up the phone and returning to my greasy café breakfast. Across from me I spy a girl about my age scribbling away at a pad while her panini goes cold, her mobile vibrating frantically beside it.

As soon as she answers I'm back on the prowl, ears pricked for any fascinating morsels of conversation that might drift my way and inspire me.

"No, the train isn't for another ten minutes. How's Isis doing?"

Boring

"Yeah, she's been a bit temperamental since the vet..."

Boring

"A bird? Ugh. I hope you've disinfected. But that's a good sign, it means she's warming to you."

Not great, but maybe...

"Trust me, a dead body in the hall usually means she's trying to impress you."

OK, now that could work really well out of context...

Before the precise phrasing escapes me, I grab my pen and jot it down on the nearest paper-like object, which happens to be a serviette.

I glance up again to find her staring purposefully across at me. I do my best to affect an air of nonchalance and pretend I'm deeply engrossed in finishing some sort of napkin-based essay. It's probably fair to say my best isn't very good. I fight the urge to gulp when a shadow falls ominously over my table.

"Were you just eavesdropping on my conversation?"

My heart goes cold.

"Sort of. Well, more like...uh...No, not in, like, a bad sort of..." a panicked tangle of words tumble out "Um, is too late for me to be indignant about that accusation?"

"May I ask why you were eavesdropping?"

"It's a...Like a...um...A sort of writing project thingy that...uh..."

"Bugged?"

"Bugged, yes. Wait, how do you-?"

"Me too."

"Oh."