

LEE STODDART

Ham, Egg and Chips

“God, I miss their ham, egg and chips. Don’t you, Janey?”

That’s it, the reverential silence has been shattered.

Kobe had been staring vacantly at the burnt-out shell of the West Bay Cafe for a couple of minutes before making this momentous proclamation that only I will hear. The cafe’s fire-blackened timbers stick out from the promenade like the ribs of a fossilised stegosaurus I’d seen on a school trip a lifetime ago.

Behind us, the tide has almost completed its retreat across the sands and rock pools, exposing the dark-green and black seaweed to stink poisonously in the growing heat. The last of the salt water steams off it as, with no hint of a cloud in the sky, the early morning sun scorches everything it touches, until all vestiges of moisture have been burnt off.

Other than Kobe’s fidgeting and heavy breathing, the shoreline is perfectly still and silent once more, until he can’t stay quiet any longer, and again he holds forth with unwanted nostalgia. “The ham was more like a gammon steak. The eggs were like two big yellow...”

He stops dead before his sentence has finished, unable to complete the lame cliché. The sound of that whiney voice of his has already dragged me back to focus on him, when I should be thinking of stuff that really matters.

“Kobe, were you about to say ‘suns’? *Really?*”

His head drops and he stares at the cracked concrete of the promenade, prodding at a loose pebble with the toe of his what once passed for shoes, like a naughty schoolboy.

“Maybe, I—”

“Jesus H Christ. You’re an idiot,” I mutter, not quietly enough that he couldn’t hear.

Angrily, I turn away from him and the cafe and brace myself against the promenade’s rusty iron railings, staring at the rapidly drying rock pools below. Where the water has evaporated completely, miniature, white saltpans shimmer.

I kick myself for taking an unnecessary, self-indulgent trip down memory lane, lost in contemplation of happier times. Stupid of me, I should be more alert. I sure as hell can’t count on Kobe anymore. I *have* to rely on *me*.

Glancing upwards, the sun has climbed higher than I expected. Must be about ten.

“Best get back.” I sigh, and turn my stony gaze back on him, but he meets me with soft, bovine eyes and my anger leaves me.

Not that I can *really* see his eyes; or he, mine.

We are completely wrapped head to foot in loose, hooded robes made from any bit of rag we had found and stitched together. Beneath the hoods our faces are encased in cloth masks, except for a thin slot across the eyes.

I sport a cracked pair of *Reactolights*. I’d found them four years ago, digging through the carcass of a *Specsavers*. I couldn’t believe my luck. They weren’t the perfect prescription but were close enough.

Back then we could travel further. The temperatures didn’t peak as high and Ramsgate, just six miles away, was still achievable in a day. But, as temperatures rose, and we edged closer to starvation, our energy and strength abandoned us. These days, we only just manage the three miles or so to Westgate. Not that Westgate offers much more than anywhere else, in these trying times.

“It’s getting late. Heat’s building and it’s at least an hour home. Better move.”

Kobe lifts his hessian scavenging sack, the legend ‘Anston’s Cattle Feed’ still just legible on the weave, and shakes it at me. It’s empty. No surprise there.

In mine, I have a couple of lizards and a grass snake, still wriggling. I’d managed to catch them as they basked on a rock, laid out like sacrifices to the gods. I’m sick of eating reptile, but they seem to be

the only thing around here now.

I'd kill for just a taste of real beef or pork. Chicken even. Anything that doesn't crawl, slither or scuttle.

Most of the mammals and birds have disappeared. Even the rats. It's now a weekly chore to check the traps I set and used to check daily. Even then, they're usually empty.

To make matters worse, this year there's almost no edible plants to gather.

The vegetation had begun to vanish about fifteen years ago, when the daytime temperatures started to regularly peak above thirty-five. For the last few years, summer mid-afternoon highs have been over fifty, turning Kent from *Garden* into *Desert of England*.

In desperation, I've tried supplementing our diet by harvesting seaweed. Apart from being utterly disgusting, it made me sick, although Kobe went unscathed.

Going out only at night, to escape the heat, isn't a winning option, either. Surviving on such a terrible diet means our night-vision is utterly shot and bones are brittle from lack of calcium. A broken leg from a fall in the dark would be as good as a death sentence. Besides, it's not significantly cooler. The earth absorbs so much energy during the day, it's like a huge storage radiator. Once the sun sets, the baked ground gives up its heat without a struggle, maintaining the sweltering heat long into the night.

So, we stay hidden away for most of the year, only daring to come out between late autumn and early spring when the temperatures are a little lower. Even then, we only emerge in the hours between dawn and eleven, when the temperature is just about bearable with proper precautions, and we gather what food we can to last us through the summer.

"Can't we risk just a bit longer, Janey? We've got almost nothing and I'm *so* hungry. We could fish?" He fumbles in his pocket to pull out a reeled-up hook and line, but drops it in the process, the line unspooling as it rolls away from him.

Christ, he's like a child... No. He's like a newborn calf, stumbling through life on rubber legs, utterly dependent on me to be there for him.

Down at my feet, Kobe is scrambling around on the ground,

gathering up his dropped line. He guiltily looks up at me as he stuffs its unruly threads back into his pocket. Hopeless.

“Sorry, Janey...”

Even if he could get his act together, it would be pointless because the fish have finally forsaken us. The few I have managed to catch are ugly and sick. Mutated beyond recognition, they were devoured anyway. There was nothing spare for the summer stockpile.

Maybe the fish have escaped, with the birds, and headed to cooler climes?

If there are more temperate areas left.

I pray that there are, but I don't know, and there's no one here to tell me.

“No. No fishing. Come on, we'll cut across the old town. Maybe we can pick something up on the way.” We wouldn't, of course, but I had to get him moving or we'd cook in the midday burn.

Recently, he'd seemed sluggish and slow-witted, prone to melancholy and longing for yesterdays which will never return. None of which is any help to me and really quite irritating.

The world has changed. There is no going back. There's just survival.

We trudge back, towards Cliftonville. Through deserted streets littered with the carcasses of long-abandoned cars. Most of the buildings are burned out from wildfires, like the cafe, but a few still stand—ransacked and empty.

As we cross the ghost of Margate town centre, Kobe suddenly drops behind a pale blue VW Beetle. It has been stopped, waiting for the traffic lights to go green, for over twenty years. Then it was a classic car. Now, it's just rusting-metal cover. Arthritically, he hunkers down and makes to grab at the hem of my hand-made robe, to pull me down with him; but I am already there, having spotted the threat at the same time as him.

His leather-gloved finger goes up to his mouth, “Shhhh...”

In the wreckage of the old Morrisons supermarket, two figures rake over the leavings. I'd done the selfsame thing so many times myself, forlornly hoping upon hope that, this time, I'd find something useful or maybe some edible treat.

But the tins have all been harvested—everything else rotted long ago. Anything electric is completely useless, of course. Grim experience has taught me there is nothing left worth liberating.

I pull out a pair of battered binoculars from their leather case hanging round my neck. Lifting my shades, I wince at the brightness, then squint through the lenses.

The pair of newcomers sort through the rubble, turning it over with spears. On their backs they each carry carbon-fibre sports bows and a quiver full of arrows. Despite their full-body coverings, they move quickly and with assurance. Judging from their size and shape they are nourished and healthy, agile and powerful; not emaciated and weak, like us.

Reflexively, my free hand falls on the hilt of the bowie knife in its sheath on my belt.

There is only one conclusion to be drawn.

“Oh, crap. Cannibals.”

We wait in the withering heat for them to grow bored and move on.

When they eventually do, we cautiously break cover from behind the VW and creep back home. I hope to God they won't hang around and will bugger off out of the area in the next day or two.

As we walk, I ensure our tracks are concealed as well as possible. But I don't have anything handy to sweep away our footprints and it's hard to walk without trace in the ever-present dust. It's been so long since I've seen another human being, I've become lazy. Right now, I'm painfully aware I've lapsed into bad habits in my efforts to avoid discovery.

“Do you think they saw us, Janey?” Kobe calls out from the sofa at the cooler, rear of the cave. We'd got back home as the sun reached its zenith, and the heat was at its most unbearable. Outside it's easily fifty degrees. I glance at the thermometer hung on a rusty nail on the damp chalk wall—it's a much more comfortable thirty inside, and the humidity helps.

There's just enough light to see by, thanks to the mirrors I'd set up to direct daylight into the caves and tunnels we inhabit. But it isn't quite enough to see Kobe at the back, where he likes to lurk. Having

stripped out of his surface coverings he would be, as usual, lounging about on our foraged furniture in what passes for underwear - a few dirty loose cloths sewn together—leaving me to get on with the chores.

I take a deep breath, and testily answer, “Well, we wouldn’t be here now, if they had, would we?”

In the crepuscular light of the redirected sun, that bastes everything it touches in sepia tones, I try not to dwell on what my partner looks like. Kobe’s a good fifteen years older than me. He’s all bone and his filthy, desiccated skin makes him look like an unwrapped Egyptian mummy. He’s in his mid-sixties and not doing so well. He’s lost all his strength and agility in the last year, not to mention weight. He rarely speaks and leaves it to me to make all the decisions. I do the real work—sometimes he doesn’t move for days, and even then, only if I coerce him.

Yet, once, he was a handsome company director, a man of strength, wealth and power—a bullish leader, not one of the herd.

I was his young and beautiful personal assistant.

Once I’d got him to rid himself of his drudge of a spouse, we had it all and lived like royalty, off the fat of the land.

Of course, that was until the complete and utter breakdown of society.

Now, I live like a troglodyte and grub around in the earth for a few roots to eat. Were it not for me, *he* wouldn’t make it through another day. Actually, it’s a minor miracle that I keep him about at all. But I’m stuck with him. We only have each other and I’d go mad if I had no one to talk to.

Time passes without further comment from either of us. It’s not unusual. Sometimes we don’t speak for days.

Maybe I’m being a bit harsh with him. He’s worried, I can tell, sounding a bit panicky, earlier. After all, it’s been so long since we’ve seen another human being.

“Look, Kobe, they’ll just be passing through,” I tell him in placating tones. If I say it with enough confidence, he’ll believe me.

“Do you think?” He sounds hopeful. “Yes, I expect you are right. You usually are.”

By my reckoning it's the autumn of '42.

Up until about '35, there was a regular flow of people moving, trying to find some fabled safe haven or other. Most often they'd head to the South of France so crossed the Channel any way they could, on rafts, inflatables and other small craft—crammed to the gunwales with desperate emigrants, in an ironic inversion of the early twenty-first century migrations of refugees.

Idiots!

Like it's going to be cooler in Monaco or Marseille than it is here. Scandinavia might make more sense. Scotland even.

At that time, those of us who chose to make the best of it in one place called them, rather disparagingly, *Nomads*. They, equally dismissively, called us *Stayers*. To choose one over the other was an act of faith—no one ever returned to testify whether they had chosen wisely or not. We remained, to hunt and gather as best we could where we knew the locale; praying it wouldn't get any worse, hoping we could make it better.

Besides, this was our home.

The last contact we'd had with anyone was a couple of male Nomads in the late spring of '39. Despite the risk, we cautiously welcomed them into our home, glad of the company and eager for any outside news. I particularly remember that they rather rashly produced a Swiss Army Knife to eat with. The height of retro-tech and *very* desirable.

The next morning, they left without a word, before we'd woken.

It seemed ungrateful after we'd shown them our hospitality, but I was pleased they were gone and Kobe never mentioned them again. At least they didn't steal any of our scarce supplies. That was the last summer we truly had enough to eat, after that it's all been downhill. Next year, I doubt there will be enough for even one.

Since then, we'd seen no one.

Until this morning, of course.

"Try not to worry about it, Kobe. They'll have gone away already. But just to be on the safe side, we'll have to lie low for a while and keep a watch out. It'll be just grazing on moss for a few days, though. Can you be a dear and go and draw some water from the well and scrape some dinner off the walls? I'll go out now and take down the mirrors."

He groaned, “But...”

“Yes, dear, I know. It’ll be dark, but at least you *like* moss. *I* can’t stand it.

“If they’re still hanging about, we can’t risk them seeing any reflections.

“First light tomorrow, I’ll make sure we’ve left no other traces on the surface they can track back to us.”

Heading for the surface, I imagine I hear Kobe tear himself from the couch and shuffle off down the tunnel, lurching like a Romero zombie. He’s struggling more and more in the twilight world we live in. He would be bracing himself against the walls as he hobbles off, carefully feeling for the familiar handholds and secure footfalls, making slow progress on the slippery chalk floor. He’ll give up halfway and slope off, back to his corner of the cave, defeated.

I’ll end up doing it myself, like always.

Was it really fifteen years ago, when he was limber and had few issues navigating the tunnels, that we first came down here after our tribe was driven apart? Next year, I’ll be fifty - the same age as he was then. I hold no delusions I’ll see sixty-five.

Night comes and I sleep fitfully in the cave darkness, knowing what I have to do and worrying that the cannibals may have tracked us.

An hour before first light, I rise and leave Kobe resting in his usual spot, on the dilapidated couch; to meet the pre-dawn dressed in my usual UV-protective ensemble.

I don’t like lying to Kobe, but on this occasion, it feels necessary. I only have a few hours to try to find the interlopers. Given how long we’ve resided in the caves, I’m sure it would be almost impossible to hide all signs of our presence and I’m certain they could easily find us—if they haven’t already moved on. So, I have to find them first and neutralise the risk. My plan is to start at Morrisons and work my way outwards. I’ve gotten pretty good playing the tracker and hunter—although my prey is usually much smaller and never armed with powerful hunting bows.

I reach the supermarket, as the sun edges the horizon. On the top floor of the multi-storey car park, I slither onto the roof of a four-wheel drive, and keep low. Scanning the burnt-out ruins of the

town, I spot the glow of a campfire, standing out like a beacon in the penumbra of the new day. It's not too far off; near the old Six Bells pub.

My God, the arrogance of these two, advertising their location so blatantly!

Perhaps, they are survivors of a paramilitary band, from before society finally and irreparably collapsed? That might explain their overconfidence.

Dangerous men.

Well, I have something they'll want, if I can't get them to listen.

I strike out towards their smoke signal. Prowling through the abandoned streets. Keeping to the shadows, I warily approach the pub from the street behind.

As I circumnavigate the building, I can see the smoke is emanating from a campfire, just across the road, set in the porch of St John's Church.

A gently bubbling pot of stew is suspended above it. The smell of simmering pork floats on the air and assaults my senses.

Jesus Christ, I haven't had meat in months.

No, it's been a full year since the last of the stock was consumed.

I can feel the drool building, dribbling out the corners of my mouth. I imagine biting, slowly chewing the meat. But where the hell had they got pork from?

Oh, yeah. Cannibals.

Long pork.

I creep through the lychgate and up the path; the taste of the stew in my nostrils.

Would it be *so* bad if it was also on my palate?

Hang on a minute—what the hell am I doing, charging in? This is madness. I can't let my desire to feed drive my actions.

I need to think it through.

What would *I* do, if I was them? Hold up in the coolest place...

Inside the church?

In the crypt.

Sounds about right. OK.

Having reassured myself, I continue my slow progress into the portal, my right-hand resting comfortably on the bowie knife

tucked in my belt, spurred on by the prospect of illicit protein.

The view into the church is obscured by punk-wood oak doors, which are still in place, but only just. Kicked in long ago, they hang from one hinge each, looking like a pair of rotten teeth in the otherwise empty sneer of a skull.

Drawing closer still, I peek inside. No one visible. They must be asleep. Perhaps, I can grab a mouthful of stew. I'm *so* hungry.

"That's far enough. Chuck the knife through the door and turn around." The command comes from behind me.

"Ah, shit." What else was there to say.

They're *not* in the church.

I turn, but resist losing the blade.

One man rises from behind a gravestone. The other steps out from behind a graffitied war memorial.

Bastards.

They must have spotted us yesterday and just calmly walked off to set their trap; baited with the leftovers of some poor sod they'd saved for just such an occasion.

How many times have they pulled this stunt?

Well-practised, I guess.

I can't really blame them.

You do what you have to do, to survive.

Both of them brandish their bows—arrows nocked and ready to be loosed. They must have been there all bloody night, waiting. Neither has a UV-protecting hood on, perhaps it's the arrogance of youth, or maybe just ignorance. And they are young—eighteen maybe. Well-fed and plump—by today's standards at any rate.

Fit, healthy and beautiful.

Two of the last of the bastard litter mankind ever produced—a progeny that was, for some unexplained reason, almost entirely male by 2025. It wasn't long after that all live births stopped entirely. After that, the heart went out of mankind, as realisation hit—fifty years left, then that was it. The race was over.

I'm the rarest of commodities: a survivor *and* a woman.

I know I have value.

Fearlessly, I pull off my hood and mask, then drop my robes from my shoulders—revealing my emaciated and scarred, but still

recognisably female form.

“Fuck, is that...?”

“Yeah. Well, I’ll be bolloxed.”

Momentarily distracted, the two dip their bows. They look like they’ve never seen a woman before. One has his mouth flapping up and down in disbelief. For a second, I have the advantage and casually throw the robes behind me, along with the forgotten knife which, thank the Lord, I manage to cover.

“Look, lads... we all know *what* you are, and I’m cool with that. I could even manage a little bit of *whoever* is in the pot, myself. But, I bet neither of you has ever been with a real woman. We should come to some kind of *arrangement*. You know?”

“Otherwise, you’re just going to have to kill me; and what good would that do anyone? Sure, I’d put a bit more meat in the larder, but you’d be missing out on the only real woman within a hundred miles of here. Then, you’ll be back to bugging each other, again. What do you say?”

Emphasising my point, I catch my thumb in the front waistband of my last pair of faded, ancient M&S knickers—not hand-made from found scraps of cloth, but real shop-bought pants. I’d worn them especially for the occasion, a glamorous distraction if needed. I edge them down, just a little.

I don’t want them to misinterpret my intentions.

It doesn’t seem possible that they can; but, they clearly aren’t the brightest pins in the box.

Gravestone-man responds first. He shrugs and raises his bow again, drawing back the string until its taut. “Can’t miss what you’ve ain’t had.”

“Wait, I can sweeten the deal.” I interject swiftly, making him hesitate once more.

“I can provide a safe haven. Somewhere away from this heat. Somewhere easy to defend. It’s got its own fresh water and a food supply. Close to the sea. We can share it. There’s enough—”

Flappy-mouth monument-man nervously finds his voice, “Karl, perhaps it’s worth a look. Maybe it’s time to settle down. Besides, he’s. *She’s* a woman. Please.”

Interesting. He sounds like a younger version of Kobe. Whiney.

Weak. Stupid. Led by his dick. Easily manipulated.

My kind of guy.

“Shut the fuck up, Geoff. You can get it over with and fuck her, if you want; get it out of your system. I’m not bothered. Then we can eat her anyway. Look at her, she’s a withered old crone—”

“The recent hot weather has not been altogether kind to my skin, I have to admit.”

“—but we are not, and I want to make this perfectly fucking clear, going to be shacking-up in a cosy, little, seaside retreat threesome with her or anyone else. It’s just the two of us. Got it? Shit.”

I don’t know whether to be angry at the rejection or panicked by his aggression, but, somehow, I have to seal the deal.

Appeal to their bellies?

“OK, OK! Look—Karl. Geoff. I can throw in my partner. He’s *really* old. Past his prime. Useless really. But there’s some flesh left on him. He’s yours. Sauté him, boil him up, grill him. I don’t give a fuck. Just don’t kill *me*.”

I’ll have to sort this out later, with Kobe. When this has all blown over there’ll be hell to pay.

“Oh, nice. Throwing in your man. Way to go!” Karl sneers. “OK. Let’s take a look. What have we got to lose?”

The sun is rising as I slip back into my robes and pull the face coverings back over my head, whilst struggling to keep the recovered knife out of sight. As I hastily shove it up my right sleeve to secrete it in the voluminous folds, the blade draws a deep welt on my forearm. I flinch, but manage to stay silent within my cowl.

This isn’t really going to plan at all. I’d hoped to get the drop on *them*—despatch them before they got a chance to defend themselves.

From behind, Karl shoves me roughly on the shoulder, and we set off to find Kobe, *my* sacrificial gift to them.

Still, Geoff seems nice.

I walk between them: Geoff on my left, Karl on my right. Occasionally, I feel Geoff’s hand brush mine.

Christ, is he trying to hold my hand?

Does he think this is some kind of date?

I allow my hand to peek out of the robe sleeve, and return

the compliment with my gloveless fingertips. He curls two digits around my little finger—a small child holding their mother's hand. Like I once did...

I brush the hood back from my face a little and smile lovingly at him from beneath my rag veil. *Yes, Geoff. Yes, I can be your mum. Or your lover. Or both, if you want me to be.*

I will my thoughts into his head before turning a steelier gaze on Karl, who remains blissfully unaware of the flirtation going on next to him.

It doesn't take long to get back to the cave.

I call out as I cross the threshold, "Kobe. Kobeeee? We've got visitors. Where are you?" Karl leans on his spear beside me. Geoff is skulking around the back of me, bow in hand, nervously pacing up and down.

My words echo back at us, but there is no answer. "Perhaps he's gone to the well. It's deep inside, through some tunnels. Or else he's still asleep on the sofa."

Karl doesn't look like he believes me. "Better go inside then," he says, stepping forward, spear thrust out in front, prodding me onward. As the sun ascends behind us, I reset the mirrors to light our way in the dark.

I drop my hood and cast my mask to the floor.

It's time to stop the deception, to reveal the truth. Even to myself.

Reaching the inner cave, I point at the sofa in the corner. Kobe is there, supine in the deep shadows, where he's been all along.

Karl strides forward, ready to turn poor Kobe into a human kebab, but stops short as the reflected rays of the rising sun catch up with us, illuminating Kobe's rictus grin.

"What the hell?"

Seizing the moment, I yell wildly and leap at Karl, Bowie knife raised high to slash downwards across his back. But, in my haste, I slip on the treacherously slick chalk, lose my footing and crash noisily to the ground. Dropping the blade, it skitters into the dark, out of reach.

I try to regain my feet, but get only halfway before Karl turns his attention on me. He looms over me, a murderous look on his face as

he wields the spear. “Double-crossing bitch!”

In desperation, I throw my hand up to protect myself from his thrust.

Then, the air between us is sliced apart as I feel the shaft of an arrow glance off my shoulder. Geoff must have taken a wild shot at me.

Dropping back down and retreating into a foetal ball on the floor, I wrap my arms around my head and brace myself to face death.

But, the seconds slip by and death does not come.

Peeking out from behind my fleshy barricade, I see a hand reaching down to grasp my forearm. Awkwardly, I push myself off the floor as Geoff pulls me up.

Karl lays, looking back at me in vacant disbelief, an arrow through his neck, his body pinning poor Kobe down on the sofa.

Poor, long-dead Kobe.

For the first time in a long while, I can see the rotten flecks of flesh that still cling to the knife-scarred skeleton where I have carved the meat from his bones; his skull crushed from the flint I used to brain him. Kobe’s only good for soup, now.

Out of the dead man’s bony grasp, a faded menu photo of a plate of ham, egg and chips wafts to the floor. It settles amongst the carpet of marrow-sucked bones, next to the bright red Victorinox knife I’d used to excavate them.

Geoff picks up the laminated sheet and stares at it. His eyes dart from Kobe, to Karl, to me and back to Karl before welling up in tears. “Oh, shit, shit, shit. What have I done?” Wailing, he throws himself on top of Karl and hugs his lifeless body.

“Nothing you shouldn’t have, my love. Now, come on. Let’s get this mess cleared up, and dinner put on. Waste not, want not. There’s a good boy.”

Three weeks later and I don’t know what I would do without lovely Geoff. I think I’d go mad without him to talk to, even if he is a bit whiney. Still, there’s plenty of flesh on those bones, when the time comes.