

Second Sun

On the hundredth hour of the day, Arnold is smoking and watching a pigeon. In the five minutes he has been doing so, it hasn't moved once.

Fingers twitching, Arnold heaves half the cigarette into his lungs.

It could just be sleeping. But then how to explain the milky film across the eye he can see? Occasionally the feathers quiver but he is fairly certain that this is just the breeze.

Of course, the unending day must be having an impact on the animals too. Could too much light kill a bird? He doesn't know. In truth, despite his reputation, Arnold only studied the hard sciences to any depth. But surely they have sleep cycles just like his.

To every estimation this day could last weeks. What state will nature be in by the time night falls gentle once more? Animals don't even have the luxury of understanding why. They will never have heard of Betelgeuse. Will not know of supernova. Most species will likely not even have the concept of 'sun', let alone the comprehension that for these few long, weeks a star thousands light years away, already dead, has decided to make its exit as a second one.

Arnold has smoked the cigarette down to ashes. The heat against his fingers and thumb is good. Cleansing.

But then it is too much and he drops the embers, cursing.

His hands are shaking too much to light the next. Though this is surely a sign that having another is important, and he is stuck fumbling like this until his bus pulls in.

The passengers file off with empty faces. Arnold doesn't like to look at them. It seems almost indecent, to take advantage of the light in this way. Just another sight that the unending day has exhumed.

He glances back at the pigeon. There is still time to get an answer. He could approach, poke it with a foot if it still doesn't move. But he leaves it too long, the other driver has already dismounted.

Arnold vaguely recognises her though he can't put a name to the face. It is not the usual woman, who has always glared at him since he arrived late for his shift two nights in a row. Arnold's body clock cannot grasp this cosmic event anymore than a pigeon could.

The driver gives him a wave. There is grey under her eyes that her smeary make-up can't cover.

"Crazy night. Drive safe, love."

Arnold nods. Doesn't correct her. But then, perhaps she is correct. Is the true definition of night the absence of light or a set period of hours? The latter seems more rational but his body screams the former.

The image of the pigeon is still with him as he starts up the bus. That stillness. It squirms through his thoughts like a maggot.

And so Arnold Drew, the driver of Night Bus - number 14, starts his shift. Or, rather, Arnold Drew, the driver of *Bus* - number 14.

It seems that the universe has conspired to take even this scrap of identity from him.

*

It is unsettling to see his route in full light, even though he has had a few day-nights to adjust. Glass buildings gleam with an emptiness that almost seems like CGI. The winding roads, with the blanket of dark pulled back, give the impression of a maze with no exit. Though he knows, of course, that this is the heart of London, he is reminded more than anything of the pictures he's seen of contemporary Chernobyl. The city has a hollow feel, so that even though the light shows it him clearer than ever, it seems like a paint-by-numbers picture abandoned halfway. There are too few people on the streets and even these seem somehow guilty, as if the supernovae were a searchlight locked upon them.

Though, of course, the day-night it is not quite the same as daylight. The colour is off and gives the world a flat quality, as if the heavens have been fitted with strip-lights. And the day is even brighter still. Some people can't stand it; have shifted to his hours, just to escape its gaze.

It is unfair surely, for the cosmos to impose on human lives in such a way. Arnold has a sense of a bubble being stripped from people, as essential as the ozone layer. Though he has had a love of space since he was a boy, part of him wants to wrap his head in tinfoil and cower beneath its sublime force. His life is so small.

Only the foxes and badgers seem unperturbed, trotting along the pavements and squabbling over rubbish for all to see. And, putting this together, Arnold berates himself for thinking that knowledge of supernovas gives him any superiority. It is not like knowing can change anything.

Most people can't accept this line of thinking, however. Those who know of his previous line of work question him like disciples seeking the face of God. He is never sure what to tell them. Beyond the basics, astronomy is mostly maths, but numbers can't sate their hunger. Besides supernovas were not his field and though he'd read that this would happen one day, he had never imagined his living through it. But then, no one does it comes to these things. No one ever really believes that it will happen to them.

At the traffic lights, Arnold allows himself to shut his eyes, just for a second. The dark is a poor substitute for the real thing.

At the next stop a suited woman in a pencil suit boards. Then a man stinking of booze. Arnold doesn't even try to imagine the lives of his passengers anymore. Most of the people that ride his bus want to be forgotten.

Angelica might be able to better help those seeking answers. Only the human sciences could explain the seismic shift that everybody has felt in the deepest parts of their gut. It seems almost cruel that Freud died almost a century too early to see it; for something, nameless and formless has been bubbling to the surface over the past forty-eight hours. Some people are developing hair-trigger tempers. Other weep at nothing. Arnold would say that the world has gone mad but he fears, rather, that this is the new face of sanity.

A headache is gently pressing his brain between two palms. It brings water to the corners of his eyes. He feels like ant under the magnifying-glass of a child.

The sunglasses he took to wearing on the second night-day had helped a little. But a drunk girl had said that he looked like 'some dude from a sci-fi B-movie'

and all her friends had laughed. He had kept the glasses on until the girls had dismounted, then had quietly slipped them into a bin.

Angelica would tell him not to mind them. She would say that none of it really mattered and make a joke at the girl's expense. But they haven't spoken in months. Or, rather, not communicated. Of course words have been exchanged but that is not the same.

He is uncomfortably reminded when they first met. Had his first impression been right after all?

It had been a blind date. The first he'd ever attempted. One of his colleagues had badgered him until he'd agreed to be set him up with one of her friends.

They would be perfect for each other. He and Angelica. She had said.

Though he did not like to confirm the stereotype of assigning supernatural powers of the fairer sex, had marvelled at this, that his colleague could look into his heart and see stars-crossed, when even he, himself, was forever uncertain of what lay there.

And so for, for the first awful hour of the date, he had doubted that there was even an attraction. She was pretty, yes, painfully so even. But she had made him uneasy, this woman sitting perfectly still across from him, pulling a whimsical smile at his attempts at jokes.

Her dress was simple white. His shirt and jacket black. She, solidly built, confident in the space. Whereas, he, Arnold, often felt as if he had been made for another world. Was it this that made him feel as if he were looking at her through his telescope? A heavenly body, light-years away.

He had had to keep wiping his sweaty palms down his trouser legs under the table, at the time worrying that she would notice and think him a pervert. And so his palms grew even sweatier.

By the time he made the excuse of getting more drinks, her voice had retreated to a tinny ringing, a whisper of background radiation left over from the big bang.

He'd loitered behind a crowd of loud women and, despite fretting over how emasculated he must look, had cursed inwardly when the barman caught his eye.

Are you sure he's really my son?

His hands were slippery on the glasses. He had not realised that Angelica had risen to help. The moment of collusion passed too quickly for him to remember. Only the memory of the stain, spreading, red on white.

He nearly smashed the remaining glass in his frantic grab for the napkins. Made to mop the mess up. But of course, the spill was across her bosom. Adding molestation to the mix was the last thing the disaster needed. He pressed them into her hands instead, feeling the red reach his cheeks. The entire bar had paused to watch.

"I'm sorry. So sorry. I didn't- God. I'm so sorry." He had said.

But then she laughed. Laughed. Just like that. Arnold froze, terrified of this strange force.

"Your face." She had said. Then, "It's just a dress. I can always buy another."

The napkins had done nothing, of course, and now she laughed at herself for even trying.

And in that moment, Arnold knew love.

"Come on. Give me your jacket." She had reached out. The thought to refuse didn't even occur to him.

And with the most expensive piece of clothing he owned on her back, of course he had to follow her home.

Their relationship came as simply as that, so that neither of them had thought to question it until his next mistake. When buying another was impossible.

These memories distract him. He has to make an emergency stop to avoid the woman standing in the middle of the road.

The suited woman swears, her papers have flown all over the floor of the bus. The drunk man on the back is sobbing from where he hit his head on the seat in front. Why is that Arnold always seems to find himself at the root of such pain?

"I'm sorry. So sorry." He is saying. The woman looks up from gathering her papers long enough to glare, but otherwise he gets no response.

The woman in the road is still there. Her ethereal face is dwarfed by the front window of the bus. She is young, slight. Fragile almost. It is only now that Arnold notices that she is topless. What is it about the endless day that makes this seem perfectly natural?

But still, she has yet to move. Her friend is on the pavement, hugging herself in bra and knickers. He makes a motion with his hand - please move.

Nothing.

Is there something wrong with them? This is like the pigeon all over again. He needs a cigarette. But passengers are waiting.

His sweaty hands slip on the seatbelt and then he is off the bus, trying to find the shape of words that can reach this woman, let him move on his way.

But suddenly her legs are around him, the force of her leap sending him crashing against the bus, so that he has to put his hands to her back to stop her from falling. Her breasts push against the thin cotton of his shirt and he finds himself thinking of Angelica, the passion with which she had pushed him onto the bed that dreadful morning.

It will be different this time.

But this woman is not Angelica.

He finds himself kissing her back, the stark taste of Schnapps in her mouth. But then she is out of his arms and running with her friend, the pair of them laughing and screaming. Arnold listens to the ring of their bare feet on tarmac until these, too, are claimed by the empty brilliance of the night.

Arnold hates himself. And as he mounts the bus once more; bringing it, growling, to life; he could almost mistake the feeling for peace.

He has been rehearsing over and over how he will inform Angelica of this infidelity throughout the rest of his shift. She might throw him out, his possessions tossed onto the street like birds falling from the sky. At the very least she will fly at him with the flat of her palms. He deserves this much.

He almost flies up the stairs to their room. But when he opens the door to the sunset the night makes through their red curtains, he finds her eyes open and

latched onto his. A cautious smile touches her lips, hair fizzing out from her face like a halo.

And he knows that he cannot do it.

Telling her will change nothing.

The anger crushes him. Like a fat woman sitting on his chest. And, yes, Angelica has put on weight this last year. Though she's lost some of it since she'd been trying to mend things between them, her figure isn't what it was.

He climbs between the sheets with his back to her; can almost feel the heat of her hovering hand. But after a minute he hears the rustle of her putting it back to the mattress.

It's not the first night that he's done this, but when it was dark he could always pretend sleep. He swallows the lump in his throat and stares at his bedside table where the picture frame faces the wall. The light is an accusation. Yet he finds that he doesn't care much, and after some minutes she leaves to prepare for work.

How is that what made him fall so helplessly in love with her, now fills him with such hate?

*

The route becomes wilder every shift. And still no sign of the day abating.

Naked people are a common sight now. Of both sexes. Young and old. The naturists always seem mid-party but, when they lift their faces to the bus's passing, their expressions are curiously empty.

He's seen people dancing; fighting; fucking; an old lady on a horse, who'd glared at him as if he were the one imposing. One circuit, a man was playing a full drum-kit in the middle of Oxford Street. How did he even get it there? At least there was enough room for Arnold to manoeuvre around safely. Throughout this, the man never lost his rhythm. Arnold had almost liked it, was sad to see the street return to quiet his next time through. In that beat, someone had, at last, brought the ache lodged at the base of his skull into the light of night.

He had not been so appreciative of the girl who'd set fire to one of the back seats. She'd sat next to the flame, picking at her nail varnish, as he'd sprayed it with the extinguisher. Though he knew that he should report her, he'd returned to the wheel quietly, breathing in deep the smell of melted plastic like a drug. The girl had spent the rest of the journey staring calmly out of the window, had wished him a good night when she got off.

The wail of police cars is never far away. Though they have bigger crimes to chase than melted bus seats and naked people. Why bother with the naturists when there are so many and those who would be offended are sleeping - or trying to?

It is as if the displaced force of dreams and nightmares is carving out brave new territory. Though all the reports state that it can only be weeks until the supernova submits to the dark, Arnold knows in his bones that the city is being marked in a way that won't, can't, return to slumber.

Yet none of this really touches him. This work has always entailed uneasiness and oddity. Under the cover of dark, another world can slip into reality. And so he has known drunks of every shade: violent, incoherent, buoyant, flirtatious. He has gained a sixth sense for the broken people; too fragile to face the day; muttering to

themselves or clutching at a carrier-bags as if they contained their entire world, which, for all Arnold knows, they do. Then there are the teenagers, full of rage and uncertainty, spitting out their despair on Arnold's anonymous figure. He almost considers it part of his public service. Because there is a liberation to these encounters too, in spite of all the hurt and messy feelings, at last people of the city are authentically meeting.

And without these trials, he would feel an imposter.

*

"You don't want to work with buses. It's slave's work." His father had said, the dawns when his mother had taken Arnold to see him get off work.

It had always set his whole body buzzing to see the bus draw up and his father emerging from the saddle of the beast. That his father worked past his bedtime awed him, as if he was master of a world as fantastical as that found through the magic wardrobe his mother liked reading to him about.

And he had loved the buses. The brute weight of them. Their growl and hum. That smell, which even now he can't distinguish from that of the pipe his father had smoked. So that, sometimes, when he drives, he catches a whiff of him; imagines that if he were to turn his head, just a little, he would see his father's ghost happily puffing away in the seat behind him.

But his father, seeing the spell the buses had over Arnold, warned him away from what he knew as a miserable job. "Don't follow your old man. Work hard and make something of yourself, boyo." He'd say.

Yet, sometimes, Arnold is not so sure what it is that the hard work has made of him.

It had been a teacher evening, the sport's hall humming with families and the squeak of rubber on the shiny wooden flooring. Arnold had been uncertain how to respond to his friends, passing by with their own parents; the rules were different on those evenings.

Ms Amrit, his science teacher had stood right up and shaken his father's hand when they'd approached. "A young Einstein you've got there, Mr Drew."

And that had not been the end of the compliments. Arnold had soon found himself trying to shrink down into his white gym socks. His father's face had been wiped clean with shock, and, afterwards, he would not stop shaking Ms Amrit's hand. The embarrassment had been excruciating.

When they had reached the privacy of the car-park, comforting under the sleepy neon-lights, his mother had squeezed him so hard Arnold had wondered whether she were trying to absorb him back inside of her.

"We are *so* proud of you." She had said.

His father had ruffled his hair, though there was uncertainty in his eyes.

"Are you sure he's really my son?" He'd said to Arnold's mother and they'd all laughed, though Arnold had felt something itch inside of him, like a trapped mouse.

That line would return to him many times in the years to come.

At the Liverpool matches. His father out of his seat and roaring along with the crowd, whilst Arnold tried to squirm deeper inside his anorak; the words to 'You'll Never Walk Alone' lodged in his throat as if he were choking on the chicken and gravy pie, now congealing in his palm.

Are you sure he's really my son?"

When his hamster had died and he had locked himself inside the bathroom. His father hovering on the other side of the door, knocking and saying 'helpful' things like, 'it was just a hamster', 'now you can sleep without that wheel squeaking all night', 'come on, you're nearly a man, boyo' and, finally, 'how about you open up so we can go down town and get you another?' Until Arnold's Mother had shooed him away and coaxed Arnold out to the comfort of her lap. But with his father perplexed expression hovering, the tears wouldn't come.

Are you sure he's really my son?"

Then the evenings that the pair of them would carry his telescope - the treasure of two birthdays and a Christmas - up the hill to where the unfolded. The night had always seemed so calm and still, until Arnold put his eye to the lens, when stars would expose their burning hearts.

His father would rub his meaty hands against the chill and say ridiculous things, like "Old Venus is bright tonight." So that Arnold would have to bite down on his frustration and explain calmly, like he had the week before and the one before that, that Venus couldn't be seen this late in the year. In his father's eyes, something almost like fear.

"That's my boyo." He would say, ruffling Arnold's hair.

And the line would arise, unbidden, unspoken, like it always did.

Are you sure he's really my son?

Arnold finds himself jerking upwards, as if he had fallen asleep, though he's been awake all this time.

Eyes on the road. Another death on his hands would kill him.

So focused is he, that he almost drives past the woman with a thumb out. Her eyes graze over him as she counts out the change, looking without seeing.

Arnold grits his teeth as he drives on. What is it with these memories? As if, in the absence of night, his dreams have sought him in his waking hours.

The harder he pushes them down, the more forcibly they return, until he feels that his hands are full, over-flowing.

*

Now sleep, of sorts.

The hours turn but the clock seems frozen.

His next shift, his manager is waiting for him. It is only now that Arnold realizes that he is late. He should have set an alarm, does not know why he has failed to do so again. This was his last warning. One of the other drivers has had to take his route.

Cut loose, Arnold drifts about the town, drunk on memories and what-ifs.

The school he would have attended.

The shop where they bought his first pair of shoes.

The university, where he could have studied physics like his father. Though Arnold and Angelica had both agreed that they would bless whatever calling he chose.

The park where his small face had cracked into joy at the sight of ducks. They had wedged pieces of bread inside his hand, though he had not yet mastered the concept of letting go when throwing. Angelica had teased that he took after his father and Arnold had said that she should be thankful of this as he pretended to chuck her into the pond.

The ducks are still there, awake and quacking, though something about their movements makes it clear that they are confused, even by duck standards.

Angelica and he had made love in this park once. Back when they were young and the night still allowed such freedoms.

And now, of course, he is reliving that morning when she had pushed him into the bed with feral passion, straddling him with her clothes still on.

He'd just been about to leave for work, was terrified of this onslaught. Did not trust it. Not after all those months; caught, hangdog and broken, on the event-horizon of her grief.

Are you sure? He had said.

She had pressed his mouth to his in answer, as if giving resuscitation, her hands already fighting with his belt. And so he'd kissed her back, one hand fumbling at the bedside drawer where he kept the condoms.

She had slammed it shut, almost trapping his hand.

No.

You're not on the pill. He had said.

Something terrible had stirred behind her eyes.

We'll try again. It will be different this time.

And he had frozen beneath her. A fist in his chest. He turned his cheek when she tried to kiss him again.

And just like that, their roles switched. He left his job, signed up to train as a bus driver. She returned to lecturing, took on more hours to make up the difference. Yet she somehow always managed to be waiting for him on his return. Expression hopeful; then, finally, despairing; following him about the house like a shadow.

He switched to night shift. It was as if the role had been waiting for him all these years.

Because how could she? How could she seek to replace that which was unique? Singular? There could only ever be one of him.

*

Angelica is having breakfast when he finally returns home. It will be harder to avoid her now he has lost his job. There are other lines of work with night shifts but what is the point now that night and day wear the same face?

But for once, Angelica isn't hounding him with puppy eyes. Her spoonfuls of cornflakes become smaller and smaller as he stands there, trying to keep herself occupied until he goes upstairs. He has somehow missed that she has dyed her hair again. Orange this time, like a flame. He feels utterly empty.

The junk mail he picked up on the way in has been reduced to confetti. He hadn't even realised what he was doing.

"I was sacked." He says eventually.

His heart is hammering. Surely it will come now.

But she stays sat, lifts a stray curl behind an ear. Calm. How he hates this stillness of hers.

"You'll find another." She says, continues eating.

"It was my fault. I was late. I have been for days. I hadn't been setting an alarm. My own stupidity."

"We'll survive. That job wasn't healthy for you."

Now the anger grabs him by the throat. The need to hurt overrides everything else.

"I kissed a topless woman." He says. "She put her legs around me and I-"

But he cannot go on. Her eyes are so wide they contain galaxies. And he finds that he is weeping too.

Are you sure he's really my son?

"Just shout at me. Please." He says. "Slap me. Hit me. Just-"

The softness of her lips on his has the force of a punch. He cannot hold back the tears anymore. The point of pain at the back of his skull has become a vice.

She pulls away, holds his head so that he has to meet her eyes. But he can't.

"I don't care what the doctors say, it was my fault." He croaks. "I turned away. And when I came back- When I came back he wasn't-"

But he can't finish. She entwines her hand into his and leads him up to the bedroom.

They make love with the windows thrown open, curtains fluttering like white feathers. The light sears his insides but he doesn't want to close his eyes to this. He loves every molecule of her, every mole and stretch mark. He loves the rough stubble of legs not shaved for days. He loves how her new weight fills his hands. He loves the line years of grief and laughter have etched into her face.

Her teeth dig into the flesh of his shoulder, nails tracing wheals across his back. Their breathing, torn gasps.

Deliverance.

They are still weeping when they finish in a knot of bed sheets and tingling limbs. And, at last, he allows himself night; burying his face deep in the soft mound of her stomach where the silver scar draws a crescent moon across her abdomen.

They will know her as BJ. Though on the birth certificate, she will be notated: Betelgeuse Drew.