



## APPLE

### Alan Bissett

This music to Nathan sounded like water freezing. It crept from the radio: piano notes, shivering, plink plink plink like drops. It was music for people who listened this time of night and alone, there was no doubt about that. Nate turned up the heating. He dashed a mark at the bottom of the essay, a red chicken-foot of a scribble, then buried the essay at the back of the pile: he rubbed his hands and sipped his tea and rubbed his hands and imagined for a second that he could see the fumes of his breath billowing out, but he couldn't. Jesus.

“That was Sugarplum Dashboard,” said the DJ, “with *My Iris*,” and there it was: the blokeish familiarity of the late-night radio DJ, sudden and warm, and aye, Nate thought, there are hundreds of guys like me the country over, hunched across desks, spotlit by anorexic angle-poise lamps, listening to this music.

He was tired.

He was 21 in four days time.

It wasn't healthy this staying up, wasn't good for the soul surely? He yawned. But he had work to do. He would be irritable for class in the morning, that was for sure, and the first years, Jesus, Tommy Franks and Tracy Hennigan and Martin bloody McCain. Tired, and with these pricks to teach. At the start of this practice a colleague had said, *Never work past ten, mate. No matter how much you have to do. If you work past ten they've got you.*

And the guy had laughed.

And Nate had laughed.

*Ha ha ha ha ha!*

Nate rose from his desk, went to the window and saw silver creep against the flatness of the glass. Snow. Slow tendrils, soft little flakes falling, like sleep. He wondered if the school would be closed tomorrow.

He rubbed his eyes.

*Plink plink plink*, went the music. Switch that bastardn thing off. He moved to do so, but the phone started ringing, so he ran to it automatically, fumbling his way through darkness-doused corridors. Bang. *Oyah fucker*. The lights were off; his flatmates had gone to bed, and why wouldn't they, since it was late, that's what people did when it was late, they went to bed. He switched on the light. The phone was wall-mounted in the kitchen above a note from one of his flatmates saying: *Can you pick us up a DVD for tomorrow night? Something with guns and chicks.*

'Hello?'

It was Helena. Obviously.

'Nathan. I didn't know if you'd be sleeping or not.'

‘Nah not yet. Work still to do.’

‘You work too much.’

‘I don’t work enough!’

He leaned over the kitchen counter and flicked his flatmate’s note between his fingers: blu–tac. It got webbed between his fingers He slapped his hand against the counter trying to rid himself of this blue menace, but to no avail. ‘So,’ he breathed. ‘How was your day?’

‘My day?’ she laughed, ‘let me tell you about my day.’ Then Helena launched into a long story about her boss Derek and how he was coming down really hard on her sector and even though Nate had met Derek — and he was a prick by the way, this Derek — the story still led Nate to believe that it was Helena’s fault. She had excellent customer care skills though, it had to be said. Customers praised her all the time. In fact, Nate was pretty sure Helena tried so hard with customers just to impress Derek, since Nate was also sure that they were shagging.

He squeezed the blu–tac. He said, ‘yeah yeah, I know what you mean.’ The blu–tac softened: his warm fingers, sticky, which he wiped on his jeans. *Yech* .

She sighed. ‘How was your day then, babe?’

Nate mused and opened the fridge to beer, pizza, wine. For film night. Now that he came to think of it, he also fancied something with chicks and guns, he really did.

‘Em,’ he said. ‘It was alright. Caught a wean smoking.’

‘Yeah?’

‘In a corridor! I mean, the cheeky little bastard wasn’t even trying to hide it.’

Ha ha.

‘Brazen little shit.’

Ha ha ha ha.

‘What?’

‘No, I mean. I’m just thinking of, like. You know.’

‘What?’

‘We did worse when we are at school, Nate.’

‘Oh Helena come on.’

‘I’m just saying, like. We did.’

‘Aye. So?’

‘I’m just saying. He’s smoking. We did worse.’

‘Aye I suppose, like. But I mean: what’s your point? What point are you trying to make?’

‘I’m just, like...Ha ha ha. I’m just remembering. Oh god.’

Helena was gripped with hysterics. Long giggles like a kid behind a desk in one of his classes. Sniggering at what? At something. That was for sure. He clenched the phone between neck and shoulder, took a Coke from the fridge, a whole multipack of Coke there, cold, which would hit the spot on film night, but he wanted one now. He wanted one now. Why couldn’t he have one now? He put it back.

Helena reminded him of something they’d done at school which he’d forgotten and it made him smile, the way she’d touched him then.

‘Look hen,’ he sighed eventually. ‘I’ve got to go.’

‘Aw.’

‘No honest. Shitload left to do for tomorrow.’

‘Okay,’ she said. Then after a pause: ‘love you, sweetie-pie.’

‘Aye.’

He put the phone down and went into the room and sat on the edge of the bed then lay down on the bed then: slept. He dreamt about

snow, endless drifts of it.

*You're so young! My god, I thought you were one of the pupils. Doesn't he look young? Like a baby, ha ha ha ha. I thought you were one of the pupils. Sandra? Sandra! C'mere. Come and meet Nate, he's the new student teacher. Look how young he is. Oh god, he's so sweet. I'm sure I didn't look that young when I was on my final teaching practice, ha ha ha ha.*

Okay I look young.

Nate didn't drive either. And the fucking school was miles away, the other side of the region, and no-one could offer him a lift. Not one bastard. It was the only school the college could get him, apparently. I mean, what kind of schools liasons officer was that? What so-called liasons officer was in the employ of this so-called teacher-training college? What liasoning was being done, exactly, on Nate's behalf? Some liasoning!

So. He would stay there for the duration. Helena would stay home. It was only for eight weeks and Helena was working helluva long hours anyway, jesus I mean at night she was just coming home and going straight to bed. No telly, no wine, nothing. *Boof*. Out like a light.

It was a strategic decision. For their future. Eight weeks was nothing really. Besides, Helena said, *it'll be nice to get the house to myself for a while.*

Nate would be dead busy anyway. And wouldn't it be worse for him staying up marking while she slept? *I'd just distract you! And besides, let's be honest, we could maybe do with a wee break from each other.*

Eight weeks. *Time for us both to figure out where we are. Let's look at this as a new start. See how things stand when you get back. I don't know. I just. I just don't know anymore, Nate.*

He'd bought socks which were too big. They were simply that: too big. They were flappy at the ankles and when he put on his newly-polished shoes his feet were cramped due to excess sock material. Excess sock material. For the love of god. So there you go: when he was not with Helena he bought the wrong-sized socks. That was how things were. He strode to his class — strode goddamit — a figure of authority in suit and shirt and overstuffed shoes. *Ee. Ow. Oyah* .

First year.

'Okay class. Settle down.'

Rabble rabble rabble. 'Ow, he's kicking me, sir.' 'Martin's farted, sir.' 'Sir sir,' rabble rabble.

'I said quiet!'

Simmer.

Snigger.

He looked out over the class.

The regular teacher sat at the back taking notes. Nate swallowed, hiding his wee voice inside a big one when he announced:

'Okay then. Shakespeare.'

'Shakespeare's a poof, sir!'

The laughter bloomed on the air. Nate coughed. The temptation was to say: *no Martin, you're the poof* . The temptation was for Martin to say: *no sir, you're the poof* . The temptation was for Nate and Martin to trade blows — *Wha-cha! Take that!* — and roll around on the floor, kicking, swearing, perhaps one of them taking out a sharp implement and plunging it into the other, baring teeth in an animal grin, and one of them, only one, emerging victor. Because that was the way. That was the way it would end between them.

But Nate said, 'now now Martin that's enough,' and settled the

class into their work for the rest of the lesson, and they worked industriously, behaved. And this was unfortunate, because it meant that none of them died.

The class laid down jotters as they filed out. The wings of the jotters were spread in a curved V, like seagulls drawn by infants. Nate remembered that: scribbling skies filled with curved V after curved V, flapping towards the horizon, scribbling, scribbling, scribbling, until someone, a teacher or his mum, had said *Nathan! There are too many seagulls in your sky!* And he'd said *oh*, then stopped.

'See ya sir,' said Martin, leaving the room with a nod that added: *ya fuck*.

'Goodbye Martin.'

One of the quiet girls — Mary? — smiled as she passed. Nate smiled back. He took the jotters. The regular class teacher came towards him, sidled. Sidled was almost the word for it. She too was smiling. There was a lot of smiling going on here, and sidling, can you do both at the same time? Perhaps when you were an experienced teacher you could. She slid her pen into the rings of her notepad and said, 'how do you feel it went?'

'Fine,' Nate shrugged. 'I'm really happy with that lesson.'

She nodded. 'No changes you would implement?'

'Well,' he said, 'perhaps I interrupted the group work too early. They were just getting to grips with the text and there was some good discussion going. But if I'd let them talk longer I wouldn't have had time for the plenary.'

Nate took the stack of jotters, which was heavy, and dumped it into his briefcase. Shut. Locked.

The teacher nodded.

Nate was ready to leave.

The teacher nodding made him uneasy.

‘What?’ Nate said.

‘Nathan,’ the teacher started. Then stopped. She crossed her legs and slid the pen from the notepad rings, a trailing of dots in the air. *Finish the sentence*, Nate thought. *Finish the goddam sentence*. The crossing of legs, the sliding of pens from notepad rings. Are these power moves? Are these gestures pertaining to power? *Oh finish the sentence ya fuckin*

‘You know that as head of department I have to write your report for this teaching practice?’

Nate stood his briefcase on the desk.

‘...and that what goes into this report will go towards a reference you’ll need for a job?’

Nate folded his hands over the top of his briefcase.

The teacher put down the notepad and crossed her arms. ‘Well. Some concerns about your teaching have been raised by certain colleagues.’

Nate swallowed.

‘Which colleagues?’

‘It doesn’t matter.’

‘I think it does.’

‘In your career, Nathan, you’ll often have to work beside people who don’t like you.’

‘They don’t like me?’

There was a pause, like a glass chamber in which the two of them sat silently, thoughts distilling. His last sentence: a squeak, a plea. But it wasn’t a plea. He was just asking, just wanted to know. It wasn’t a

plea. Did she think he was the type to plead? Did she think that!

‘Look,’ he said. ‘Can I at least ask what the concerns are?’

The teacher drew in breath. ‘Yes. Yes, that would be fair. Let me see. One colleague feels you aren’t prepared enough for class. Another that your marking is off-beam, and the accuracy of feedback you’ve been giving pupils...’

Nate nodded.

‘...the structure of your lesson plans. Your unfamiliarity with the QAA guidelines...’

Nate nodded again. ‘QAA guidelines. Lack of familiarity therewith.’

The class teacher finished her list and re-crossed her leg and said, ‘how do you feel about this?’

Nate looked around. On the wall was brightly coloured artwork the kids had made: illustrations for *The Tempest*. Great splashes of colour, random unschooled daubs and dabs: Caliban. Caliban. Rippling with paint. Like something from a dream.

‘I’ll rectify it,’ Nate said.

The class teacher slid her pen back into the notepad rings. ‘Good,’ she said. ‘Good. Don’t worry, you’ve still three weeks to go. If we see evidence of improvement in these areas then none of it’ll go in your report.’

Nate drummed his fingers on his briefcase and smiled. ‘Thank you,’ he said. He was thanking her. He was thanking her for what? For her time, for her opinion, both of which were valuable.

‘I don’t think students realise the volume of work teachers have,’ the woman added, as if Nate weren’t yet convinced. Though he was, *jesus*, he was. ‘It’s a very tough job, you know. You can’t expect just to

*get by.'*

'No,' Nate replied. 'You can't expect to just get by at all.'

Then he picked up his briefcase, said thank you again, and smiled as he left. He was still smiling, he realised, even once he was out of the room, so he stopped.

In the staffroom teachers chatted and swapped recipes. Talk about mortgages, holidays, boyfriends. Sometimes they moaned about the Minister for Education, who was introducing a new policy which would increase workload or paperwork, one or the other. He didn't know much about education policy. But the words *sour-faced bitch* were being employed around the staff-room. The staffroom looked very Seventies, brown, dowdy, with streaks of orange here and there, it obviously hadn't been done up for a while. The whole school felt slightly sickly, in its colour scheme that is. The bell went and the teachers left mugs for support staff to wash, which the support staff washed.

Nate stood at the window. Outside it was snowing. The pupils whirled in ecstasy round the playground, scarves, hats, gloves, he watched them. They squealed. They danced. Their skin shone red, red like the reddest apples.

His flatmates had once asked him why he taught, why he did teach. Why the education of minors took place. And he shrugged and said: *the holidays*. And they all laughed. Yep. The holidays. Ha ha. But what he wanted to say was: *I just want to inspire someone. In this godforsaken world I just want to inspire one person*. One would be enough. But under the circumstances — what with the TV being on and more wine being poured and it being late and empty pizza-boxes lying scattered around the living-room and the general fact of his life,

y'know, caving in under what felt like miles and miles of snow, the headaches, the constant headaches, the late nights with weird music that sound like water freezing, the winter uncurling and snapping in his bones each morning — it sounded silly. Let's be honest. *I just want to inspire someone?* Later he found himself sniggering at that beneath the covers, like a boy with a comic and a torch.

Next day he battled first years. They were a tide; he was Canute. They were blank, stupid, young. He threw jokes. Nothing. He threw motivational speeches: *we are on the same side, you and I, and we can do this together!* Nothing. He threw these things in like grenades, but they didn't go off. No they didn't go off. He wrote on the board and spoke very quickly and loudly to engage their attention and all the pop-culture he referred to from his own teenage years whizzed straight past them because they didn't know it.

Nate was shite.

At the end of the class he undid his cuffs and blew air. He did this as they walked past him, straight past him, muttering.

Nate sat down.

On his desk were things. Pens, registers, memos, bits of paper, he didn't even know what they were for, some of them. Everything! Everything was on his desk, all at once. Everything which the world had ever produced was on his desk, here, now, present, spilling away off the edge, uncontrollable.

Later, he was running for the phone and the kitchen was full. There was steam and clanking pots and chatter, the smell of carrots and beef. They made good meals, his flatmates, he'd give them that, gravy and veg and meat, the works. Freda was pouring from a big two-litre bottle of Coke. When Nate ran into the kitchen, Janet pretended

to stick out her foot and he leapt to avoid it, cracked his knee against the counter. *Ow fuck* . He picked up the receiver.

Helena.

‘Nate. How are you?’

‘Bad time,’ he said, rubbing his knee. ‘Everyone’s cooking, the kitchen’s mobbed.’

‘Oh.’ She paused. ‘Should I phone back later?’

‘Too much work.’

‘Oh.’

She paused again.

‘Do you want me to go?’

‘No,’ he said, ‘Stay on the phone just now, it’s fine.’

‘But people are making dinner?’

‘Yes. But it’s fine. Stay. I’m sorry.’

He looked at the girls, fighting octopus-like over the hob and slapping each other’s arms. Freda went to the bin, dropped a bottle; the noise boomed out like a depth-charge.

‘I just wanted to know if you’re coming home to spend your twenty-first with me.’

He sucked in air. ‘Ooh, Helena, that’s going to be tricky.’

He could hear her thinking: flat, hard, silent.

‘I’ve a full day the next morning. The fifth years...

have their exams...

know what I mean?

‘Oh totally.’

Freda offered him a taste of gravy. He licked the wooden spoon. She raised her eyebrows: *it’s fine?* He nodded, *yeah yeah, it’s fine* , and could feel himself drifting away from Helena like an astronaut.

‘So you’re not coming home for your birthday?’

‘No.’

‘We’ll still celebrate when I see you though, yeah?’

‘Of course.’

Spinning in space. Round and round. Further from the ship, so peaceful. Not painful. No. You couldn’t describe it as painful, this drifting towards something else, something unseen, something vast.

‘So will you phone me tomorrow?’

‘Sure,’ he said.

‘Promise?’

‘Yup.’

‘I love you, sweetie-pie.’

‘Okay then,’ he said, and hung up.

On the morning of his birthday he awoke cold. The air dressed him with cold. He put on his suit, clean shoes, shirt and tie, what he called responsibilities. For work, he dressed in responsibilities. He was responsible. But he looked so young! Well I don’t feel so young any more. So fuck you.

On the table in the hall was a card from his flatmates, which he lifted and went to the kitchen. Someone had spilt milk in the fridge. He cleaned it. He made tea with brown sugar — which was healthier than white sugar, he’d heard, because it was unrefined — and watched the news. He was 21.

He left the house at 7.06am. The walk to school was the only part of the day when he was not working. The streets were empty, echoing, buildings slow and old with dawn. The birds.

The corridors of the school.

Class. Desk. He took out his stuff, lesson plans, marking he

hadn't yet finished. The card from his flatmates; he opened it. On the front was a car at the crest of a hill, a cocky youth driving, wearing shades and a big grin. The card said: *It's all downhill from here.* Inside they'd written: *Have a good day. We'll celebrate tonight whether you like it or not!*

He took out his marking.

Outside snow had started to fall in twirling big flakes. He went to the window and watched. After a while he rested his head on the glass. Then his two hands. Then the side of his face: pressed against the cold, cheek flattened, *oh*. He moaned. *Oh please. Oh god, no no.*

There was a noise from behind him; he turned. A girl was in the room.

'Sir?'

A first year.

He coughed and straightened his tie. 'Em. Hello. Mary is it?'

She nodded.

He rubbed feeling into the side of his face: it was numb with cold.

Mary stood there with her Nike bag over her shoulder, looking at him. 'Sir, are you alright?'

He cleared his throat again: 'of course, Mary. Of course, I'm alright. Why wouldn't I be?'

She looked at him a second longer, then took her bag off her shoulder and started rummaging in it. 'Well sir. I just wanted to tell you, uh...'

He clicked a pen: *click click click click click*. He sighed.

'I just wanted to tell you how much I enjoy your lessons.'

He stopped clicking. He looked at Mary. She finished rummaging in her bag and looked back. She was short and pale and the laces on

her trainers were too big.

‘Sorry?’

‘Just that,’ Mary said, ‘I really look forward to your classes. I find them interesting.’

He narrowed his eyes and sucked in his lip. He said:

‘Is this some kind of joke?’

‘What?’

‘Who put you up to this?’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Someone must have. What is this? Was it Martin McCain? Was it one of your friends?’

‘I don’t have any.’

They looked at each other. The girl shrugged and frowned. The air between them seemed strange for a second, as if it too was listening. Nate smiled faintly and didn’t really know what to say, but Mary had already turned away and was leaving the room. He went to his table, sat down, reached for his marking, and then he noticed it on the edge of the desk: shining, red, fresh.

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