



Dead Writers in Rehab (extract)

by Paul Bassett Davies

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I had no idea where I was.

Nothing new in that, of course. If I could have a blowjob for every time I've woken up without the slightest clue to my whereabouts I'd be on a tight schedule. Sometimes I've woken up and had the blowjob there and then, or even been woken up by it, which is a nice way to begin the process of finding out where you are and who you're with and what happened last night. It's usually nice, anyway, although I woke up once to find myself being expertly felled by a head that felt, as I began to caress it encouragingly, a bit lumpy. I squinted down and saw a few strands of greasy grey hair plastered over a scabbed, flaky scalp. A flicker of memory. Dancing under Waterloo bridge. Homeless people. Then it all came back. It's amazing how much goodwill you can generate among a group of elderly derelicts if you arrive at their cardboard campfire with two bottles of vodka in the early hours of the morning, just when the party is flagging and some of the revellers are becoming downhearted and beginning to show signs of a misanthropy that's often expressed through sudden violence in these circles. You can really cheer them up. And now, as dawn chilled the air, one of them was showing their gratitude in the only way available to her. Or possibly him. God help me, I didn't want to know how much worse this could be. I swatted the scaly head away from my groin, staggered to my feet, nearly fell down again under the impact of a tremendous hammering headache and ran away.

No blowjob today just darkness. I waited for it to get brighter but it didn't. Maybe I'd gone blind, which had happened before. Sometimes I just assumed I'd gone blind, when there was another reason why I couldn't see anything. Like the day I opened my eyes to what seemed like darkness but was in fact a light so bright that it was black. After a moment I realised I was lying on my back in a field looking up into the sun. Birds were singing and the meadow around me smelled sweet. I stood up carefully, checking for broken glass, and looked around. It was a lovely

midsummer day somewhere in England. I was wearing a white tuxedo and a pink bow-tie. I appeared to be completely alone in the open, rolling countryside. Then I caught a faint bark of laughter and made out some little figures in the far distance, loading things into the back of a big truck. There must have been a road there.

I set off through wild grass that swished gently at my knees. I began to remember things and feel much worse. I knew I was about to undergo a brutal transformation as my senses came to their senses, as it were. A thundering brandy-and-cocaine hangover, one of the meanest of the tribe, was about to erupt. It did. Blood pounded through my head so hard I was sure it would spurt out of some poor, dilapidated artery, but they all held up. Once the pain had settled down to an agonising throb data began to assemble itself. I'd been at a wedding reception in the grounds of a big manor house that was presumably not far away, tucked into the undulating landscape, probably just over a slight rise to my left. There had been marquees and a stage with lighting and a PA system, which was probably what was being loaded into the truck in the distance. It was my agent's wedding. He was doing very well out of the alternative comedy boom, helping talented new performers understand that they could make a lot of money and be on TV and still be alternative. He'd just married the woman he'd been with for a while. She was a nice, sensible type, attractive enough, but not as sexy as his personal assistant, who wasn't a sensible type. She was the one he did drugs with and fucked in hotels when they went to comedy festivals together. But he was an ambitious player in a growth industry that was ultimately just as conservative as the rest of the entertainment business, and when it came to getting married he made the obvious choice. The sexy assistant spent half the party in tears and the other half with me, doing coke in various places, the last of which was an elaborate temporary structure housing the women's toilets. Like everything else at this wedding reception, it was the best that money could buy, and it was cleaner and more attractive than many of the flats I'd lived in. We ended up in one of the cubicles, where she decided it was time for us to fulfil the sexual promise that had always simmered between us, despite her being in love with her boss. We were just getting into it when she changed her mind and decided that one more good, loud session of hysterical crying would do the trick for her. A guy we both knew was passing the toilets and heard her. He came in and found us half-dressed, me trying to do up my clothes, hers in disarray as she sank to

the ground, howling with what the guy, who'd always fancied her himself, chose to interpret as trauma caused by my unwelcome sexual advances. I didn't remember much after that, except for some shouting. In the morning, as I trudged through that field, I wondered what would happen when I got back to London. Nothing much, as it turned out. For a while I got a few more pitying looks than usual, but at that stage I was pretty much immune to anything more nuanced than a punch in the face.

Why was I now thinking about that incident from twenty years ago? I have a tendency to relate everything that happens to me to some specific disaster in the past. My third book was called *Everything Reminds me of Something Bad*. It had been inspired by an experience I was having at the time with meat. I still have it. When I cook meat under the grill in my oven I always line the grill-pan with tin foil. And certain types of meat, especially lamb chops, produce a cloudy yellow fat that pools on the tin foil in a way that reminds me of how freebase cocaine - and heroin, if it's pure enough - will liquefy when you chase it down a strip of foil with a lighter under it. For two or three years after I'd given up drugs for the final time - the final time - the trigger was so powerful that I had to call my sponsor at NA. After a while he got used to it, and if I called him any time after six in the evening he'd check the caller ID, see it was me, pick up the phone and ask me how the lamb chops were doing.

Triggers. There's always something, even if you're not conscious of it. And now I thought I knew why the memory of that wedding reception had been playing out in my mind so vividly. Even though I was still in the dark, literally and metaphorically, I was convinced that whatever room or space or place I'd woken up in was somewhere in the countryside. Very, very faintly I could hear birds singing.