



“Tick Yes or No” & “Arthur Nobody”

by Bronagh Fegan

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Tick Yes or No

David had never been gifted, but always enthusiastic, so he closed his eyes and thought of Emma on the bus,

Emma, glorious on the bus, Emma on the threadbare worn seat as regal as if it was a sedan seat, as if she was being carried, as if every person who shyly avoided the near-atomic burn of her beauty were her footmen, just as every person on that bus would fall to their knees and let her stand on their backs, as though they were velvet capes to protect her most delicate and precious feet from treading upon the ground, that heathen ground, where the plebs and mortals walk, and every person on that bus who gazed upon her explosive visage knew that

Emma was born to float above them, as her domain was not the world but the sky, for she was so wonderful she could not be human, but a goddess, cast down from the heavens because the angels were envious, and she would fly among men unaware of her effect, as unknowing as a nightingale of the humans who eavesdrop, enraptured by its song, and Emma’s voice itself was as tender and sweet as the melodies of the birds at nightfall, the birds who sing glorious farewells to the sun as it sets, as though it would be the last time the sun would ever grace the earth, and the birds wanted it to remember their serenade forever,

just as Emma’s beauty would be remembered forever, scorched onto the memories of all feeble men who encountered her, and who tossed and turned each night of their lives thinking of her, whether they knew her, or whether she was simply a stranger on the street, or whether they forgot that they discovered her physical existence and were forced to wonder if they had only dreamed of her, as though she had dipped her fingers into the foggy ocean of their imaginations and cast ripples through every coil

of cortex and nerve in their brain, reverberating now and evermore in their every word, action and thought,

until every night they would lie in bed and pray and hope and beg to any and every deity that might listen that, when they closed their eyes, they would be transported to hazy reverie in her company, that they could dream of her even though they knew they could never decide for themselves where their minds go for the night, and so they would pray and hope and beg that, if they did dream of her, if she did emerge on their conscious, dancing and intoxicating behind closed eyes, they would ask to never wake up again,

because Emma was simply so wonderful that all who found themselves in her presence instantly knew that they would never find a sight so magnificent in their earthly lives again, and so they would be as well to walk into the deepest ocean, or jump from the highest mountain, or wander into the darkest forest, and they would not fear death, because she was more powerful than death, she was more powerful than any thing, because she was every thing,

she was the bitter icy grasp of the freezing water, and she was the feeling of the pressure crashing against their heart until it exploded in their chest, and she was the deep sea fish that kissed and caressed their bodies as they sank to the bottom of the sea

and she was the rush of air whipping past their faces as they dropped, and she was spiralling motions their arms made as they posed and grappled and struggled against gravity, and she was the quickening ground beneath them that seemed so far away and suddenly closer and closer still, ever advancing upon their falling forms,

and she was navy-blue shadows that surrounded them, and she was crunches and twitters and brushes of the hidden unknown beings, masked by the absence of light, and she was the absence of light, and she was the distant presence of light as well, she was the treetops that hid the moon and she was the moon,

she was the moon and the stars and the sky, and she was every thing that any one could see, and she was every thing that no one could see, she was magnetic north and the air all around enveloping the world, and she was the atmosphere, holes and all, she was the line of the horizon and the distance from the sky to the ground,

and she was all the little things too, like tinkling laughter of babies, and glistening teardrops of dormice, and fond memories that sooth old ladies on their deathbeds, and the pride of the poppies, and the feeling of bare skin upon bare skin and lips upon lips,

and she was the strange circumstances how people found love who never thought they would find love,

and she was the answer to all the mysteries, she was where the dinosaurs went and how the pyramids were formed and who kaspar hauser was and what the voynich manuscript reads and she was why hate and why love and why we think and why we are, and she was why all people lay foot on this earth, she was their reason to live,

and she was all the abstract things, she was art and thought and right and wrong, she was good and bad and she was the feeling that burned like acid in the hearts of all people, whenever there was injustice or cruelty or untruth, she was the reason people fight for what they believe, she was passion, she was obsession, she was that word – that word LOVE -

and David thought all this and thought when he might see her again, and thought when he would offer his love to her, and anticipation grew and his stomach throbbed and shivering determination overtook him and so finally he wrote on a page EMMA WILL YOU GO OUT WITH ME TICK YES OR NO

Arthur Nobody

Arthur works the night shift at a generically scummy bar so he can sit all day in a coffee shop and write like the bohemian he can't really afford to be. This will not be a major contextual issue.

He sits now as he does every day, abusing the good-natured free refill system, drinking enough caffeine to relieve the fact that he works all night and drinks (coffee) all day. Sleeping fits into the equation in patches without regularity. He sleeps when his body requires it, and his body sometimes requires it when he's in the middle of doing something else. He sleeps when on the bus and misses his stop, or dozes as he is about to drain a cup of coffee, allowing him to roll his eyes at the irony when he jerks back to consciousness, because his is a life of mundanity where falling asleep in a wacky situation, for example, at the wheel of a car, is unlikely, not least because he can't drive. Today, as ever, he has with him an elegant notebook, cast in leather with smooth champagne-coloured pages, untouched, full of potential and completely empty.

He writes at the top of the page:

This is a thought that I am having

casual ability to survive the world. He is not certain that she is a real person; rather she is some demon mocking him with her perfection. Having thought this, Arthur feels a wave of guilt lap gently at the passive-aggressive shores of his inner monologue. He doesn't think June is a demon, nor that she is mocking him, not intentionally, anyway. In fact, Arthur likes June very, very much. Coffee-levels of affection. A fact that is obvious to anyone who would bother to take notice, which from Arthur's nervous perspective is a thankfully small number.

This number doesn't include the admittedly quite gormless June, and not just because she has only just returned from the counter. She sits a black coffee before him, and leans back in her chair, arms folded, as she always does, watching him with a faint smirk on her face. Arthur amuses her, and she studies him like a caged monkey, although he is more sanitary, but equally angry. In fact, Arthur ups his levels of rage in her presence, hoping it makes him seem more edgy, like a modern day Byron in a Byronic sulk.

'God, I hate the world,' he tells her. He isn't very good at portraying emotion without the use of grand sweeping statements.

'You haven't been writing?' she asks. To the casual observer it would appear that June has an instinctive understanding of Arthur's tortured soul. This is not the case. Rather, it is the only conversation they ever seem to have.

Arthur sighs dramatically and thinks of Coleridge, then wonders if it's Coleridge who always seemed so irate, and if perhaps he has mixed him up with someone else, and oh dear, this pause has gone on too long. 'It's not that I can't write, exactly, it's just that I've stopped wanting to. Now that the real world has forced itself into my conscious, it seems pointless to write silly little stories about people who don't exist and who don't matter. And if I write the truth...it wouldn't really be writing. It would be...it would be more like I was recording the world around me, documenting the lives of those I know. Transparently biographical. That's not writing. I could write words in my usual style of my usual topics, and nobody could tell the difference, but it wouldn't feel real, it would just be like...buying a cake and telling everyone that you baked it. You might get plaudits for it, but they would mean nothing because you would know that it was fake.'

June looks sympathetic. She is much better at faking emotions than Arthur. Not that she doesn't feel concern, but she has heard this exact speech many times. Its themes and issues never change. It has even developed a stilted script and delivery, so

she suspects Arthur has memorised it, or written down and edited it so that he could perfect the fluency and eloquence of the language.

June is almost right. Arthur impressed her so much with it the first time they had this conversation that she mentioned something about how articulate he was, how beautifully he spoke, and that vague compliment rattles around his head every time he imagines kissing her. So he repeats his pretension-soaked love song ad nauseam, hoping for a similar reaction.

It doesn't work anymore. It didn't really work the first time, but they didn't know each other as well then and June was just trying to be nice. She leans into him and tries to be frank, like she thinks friends ought to.

'Why don't you just suck it up, though? Put pen to paper and keep writing and writing until something comes out that you want to keep, instead of mooching around here staring at empty pages?'

Arthur ponders this, chewing his lip. 'I don't want to, I think. If I start writing for the sake of writing, it will make the times when I do write because I have to seem worthless.'

They sit in awkward silence, trapped in Arthur's self-made paradox. June doesn't want to sympathise with stubbornness but she understands the feelings beneath his convoluted ideas, because she herself hasn't written in nearly four years. June doesn't have anything to say.

They make a little conversation about their lives, and neither really cares. He asks her what she is doing today, and she tells him she is waiting for Frank. Arthur bristles, as though bristling was an actual physical movement that a person could make when in a state of uncomfortable disgruntlement. Arthur bristles as though he is trying to raise spines upon his back like a hedgehog to protect him from Frank, for Frank is a very, very, very boring person.

Not that Arthur is exactly Evel Knievel when it comes to lifestyle, but it is a universally acknowledged fact that Frank F Winston (the F stands for Frank) is a uniquely worthless individual: monotonous, arrogant, oblivious, stopping short only of collecting spades. Arthur bristles mainly because June is not boring and has no reason to spend time with the sucking void that is Frank F Winston, and when he ponders why she is going out with such a man, he can only conclude that they do not spend much time talking, if you catch my drift, nudge-nudge, wink-wink, say no more, and this is a possibility that Arthur does not want to consider in any detail because he likes June so very very much.

June stops a waitress and asks for a cherry scone, and Arthur loves her a little bit more. He loves the smell of cherries, he loves that she loves cherries, that she will smell like cherries, that if he kisses her she might taste of cherries (although it is more likely that she will taste of barely chewed bread). As the cruelty of fate usually demands, Frank F Winston enters, June waving him over. Arthur watches darkly, having fooled himself that she might smile for him alone. Just a big smiling whore, is June.

Frank F Winston (the F stands for Facile) sits at the table and says, ‘Christ, I’m fagged.’ Fagged is a word that Arthur knows to mean tired, but isn’t sure that Frank isn’t using it erroneously to make implications about Arthur’s sexuality, but then he decides that it would be far too sophisticated a snub for Frank to make. He scowls anyway.

June smiles. Perhaps she makes the same connection as Arthur, but then she strokes Frank’s face with strange tenderness as he leans over and steals the end of her scone. ‘There’s a man with a ladder outside,’ he tells them, ‘washing windows or something,’ and then the anecdote is finished. Arthur barely disguises his repulsion.

‘We’re talking about writing,’ June tells Frank, and turns to Arthur. ‘It would be a shame if you never used up all those pretty books you buy,’ and they laugh together.

Frank F Winston (the F stands for Frankly speaking, Arthur, I used to beat up boys like you at school) only smiles, pretending that he understands them. He probably would understand if he cared enough to listen, but he really doesn’t. Really, he wants to talk about a promotion he might get at work, it’s only a title really, a few extra pound home at the end of the month, but he wants to tell June, so that he might see that smile gloss over her perfect visage, a smile so wide that stories should be written about it, if Frank had a touch of artistic intent in his soul, which he doesn’t. He waits until Arthur and June have stopped talking (although actually Arthur is in the middle of an story about his old English teacher and was pausing for breath before doing an impression when Frank cut in) and unleashes the beast.

‘Might be getting a promotion at work,’ he says. Arthur looks at him with what Frank assumes is jealousy, and he’s right, in a sense. ‘Yeah...’ he adds, stretching the word long enough for Arthur to get a quick eye-roll in before he continues, ‘nothing to go crazy about, mind, no new shoes dear, heh heh heh, just a bit of extra paper-shuffling. Bureaucracy, you know, but it’s all a step on the ladder. Have I told you about the ladder, Arthur? Not a real ladder, like the one outside, heh heh, the career ladder, as it were, you know what I mean.’

Frank didn't speak with questions or exclamations, or even statements or generalisations. He just talks, and it's all Arthur can do not to pour his coffee all over himself in the hope that he will be mildly burnt to death.

'Anyway, about this job, as you know, what I'm doing at the moment, it wouldn't be that different, and I am one of the more senior members of staff, even at my age, it's all these students coming out, too qualified for anything but scut work I always say, heh heh...' continued Frank F Winston (the F stands for Fucking hell will you stop going on about it) before June stops him.

'We'd better be heading on, we're off to see a flat,' she tells Arthur, and Arthur's kidneys wrap themselves around his throat.

'Oh. Getting serious, is it?' he asks before he can stop himself, and then he hopes that she doesn't hear the disdain or revulsion or heart-breaking disappointment in his voice. Being June, she doesn't, and being June, she only smiles in reply.

The couple stand together and shake their goodbyes. June leans in, ready to offer Arthur a kiss on the cheek as she does for all her male friends, but he moves awkwardly so that she doesn't reach. He can't bear to be kissed by her, now that he might lose her completely to that monster.

He watches them as they leave, June shimmying in a wool coat and scarf that betray the nip in the air behind the winter sun. Arthur's knee shakes. He so desperately wants to be Frank F Winston's (the F stands for Finally, the end) arm around her shoulders. Then he thinks he and June should never be together, because already it could not be the idyllic romance he has so feverishly dreamt of, his creative cogs bunged up with hours daydreaming and imagining her lips on his, her hands in his, resting heads on chests and scents mingling in the moonlight. He can't think of anything else. Additionally, he can't remember her surname and they have been friends too long for him to ask her. No love affair could survive that.

He looks down to the blank pages on the table before him. God, he doesn't even want to fill them anymore.