

THE DEATH OF BUNNY MUNRO

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For Susie

PART ONE

COCKSMAN

1

'I am damned,' thinks Bunny Munro in a sudden moment of self-awareness reserved for those who are soon to die. He feels that somewhere down the line he has made a grave mistake, but this realisation passes in a dreadful heartbeat, and is gone – leaving him in a room at the Grenville Hotel, in his underwear, with nothing but himself and his appetites. He closes his eyes and pictures a random vagina, then sits on the edge of the hotel bed and, in slow motion, leans back against the quilted headboard. He clamps the mobile phone under his chin and with his teeth breaks the seal on a miniature bottle of brandy. He empties the bottle down his throat, lobs it across the room, then shudders and gags and says into the phone, 'Don't worry, love, everything's going to be all right.'

'I'm scared, Bunny,' says his wife, Libby.

'What are you scared of? You got nothing to be scared of.'

'Everything, I'm scared of *everything*,' she says.

But Bunny realises that something has changed in his wife's voice, the soft cellos have gone and a high rasping violin has been added, played by an escaped ape or something. He registers it but has yet to understand exactly what this means.

'Don't talk like that. You know that gets you nowhere,' says Bunny, and like an act of love he sucks deep on a Lambert &

Butler. It is in that instance that it hits him – the baboon on the violin, the inconsolable downward spiral of her drift – and he says, ‘Fuck!’ and blows two furious tusks of smoke from his nostrils.

‘Are you off your Tegretol? Libby, tell me you’ve been taking your Tegretol!’

There is silence on the other end of the line then a broken, faraway sob.

‘Your father called again. I don’t know what to say to him. I don’t know what he wants. He shouts at me. He raves,’ she says.

‘For Christ’s sake, Libby, you know what the doctor said. If you don’t take your Tegretol, you get depressed. As you well know, it’s dangerous for you to get depressed. How many fucking times do we have to go through this?’

The sob doubles on itself, then doubles again, till it becomes gentle, wretched crying and it reminds Bunny of their first night together – Libby lying in his arms, in the throes of some inexplicable crying jag, in a down-at-heel hotel room in Eastbourne. He remembers her looking up at him and saying, ‘I’m sorry, I get a little emotional sometimes’ or something like that, and Bunny pushes the heel of his hand into his crotch and squeezes, releasing a pulse of pleasure into his lower spine.

‘Just take the fucking Tegretol,’ he says, softening.

‘I’m scared, Bun. There’s this guy running around attacking women.’

‘What guy?’

‘He paints his face red and wears plastic devil’s horns.’

‘What?’

‘Up north. It’s on the telly.’

Bunny picks up the remote off the bedside table and with a series of parries and ripostes turns on the television set that sits on top of the mini-bar. With the mute button on, he moves through the channels till he finds some black-and-white CCTV footage taken at a shopping mall in Newcastle. A man, bare-chested and wearing tracksuit bottoms, weaves through a crowd of terrified shoppers. His mouth is open in a soundless scream. He appears to be wearing devil's horns and waves what looks like a big, black stick.

Bunny curses under his breath and in that moment all energy, sexual or otherwise, deserts him. He thrusts the remote at the TV and in a fizz of static it goes out and Bunny lets his head loll back. He focuses on a water stain on the ceiling shaped like a small bell or a woman's breast.

Somewhere in the outer reaches of his consciousness he becomes aware of a manic twittering sound, a tinnitus of enraged protest, electronic-sounding and horrible, but Bunny does not recognise this, rather he hears his wife say, 'Bunny? Are you there?'

'Libby. Where are you?'

'In bed.'

Bunny looks at his watch, trombones his hand, but cannot focus.

'For Christ's sake. Where is Bunny Junior?'

'In his room, I guess.'

'Look, Libby, if my dad calls again . . .'

'He carries a trident,' says his wife.

'What?'

'A garden fork.'

'What? Who?'

'The guy, up north.'

Bunny realises then that the screaming, cheeping sound is coming from outside. He hears it now above the combination of the air conditioner and it is sufficiently apocalyptic to almost arouse his curiosity. But not quite.

The watermark on the ceiling is growing, changing shape – a bigger breast, a buttock, a sexy female knee – and a droplet forms, elongates and trembles, detaches itself from the ceiling, freefalls and explodes on Bunny’s chest. Bunny pats at it as if he were in a dream and says, ‘Libby, baby, where do we live?’
‘Brighton.’

‘And where is Brighton?’ he says, running a finger along the row of miniature bottles of liquor arranged on the bedside table and choosing a Smirnoff.

‘Down south.’

‘Which is about as far away from “up north” as you can get without falling into the bloody sea. Now, sweetie, turn off the TV, take your Tegretol, take a sleeping tablet – shit, take two sleeping tablets – and I’ll be back tomorrow. Early.’

‘The pier is burning down,’ says Libby.

‘What?’

‘The West Pier, it’s burning down. I can smell the smoke from here.’

‘The West Pier?’

Bunny empties the tiny bottle of vodka down his throat, lights another cigarette, and rises from the bed. The room heaves as Bunny is hit by the realisation that he is very drunk. With arms held out to the side and on tiptoe, Bunny moonwalks across the room to the window. He lurches, stumbles and Tarzans the faded chintz curtains until he finds his balance and steadies himself. He draws them open extravagantly and vulcanised daylight and the screaming of birds deranges the

room. Bunny's pupils contract painfully as he grimaces through the window, into the light. He sees a dark cloud of starlings, twittering madly over the flaming, smoking hulk of the West Pier that stands, helpless, in the sea across from the hotel. He wonders why he hadn't seen this before and then wonders how long he has been in this room, then remembers his wife and hears her say, 'Bunny, are you there?'

'Yeah,' says Bunny, transfixed by the sight of the burning pier and the thousand screaming birds.

'The starlings have gone mad. It's such a horrible thing. Their little babies burning in their nests. I can't bear it, Bun,' says Libby, the high violin rising.

Bunny moves back to the bed and can hear his wife crying on the end of the phone. Ten years, he thinks, ten years and those tears still get him – those turquoise eyes, that joyful pussy, ah man, and that unfathomable sob stuff – and he lays back against the headboard and bats, ape-like, at his genitals and says, 'I'll be back tomorrow, babe, early.'

'Do you love me, Bun?' says Libby.

'You know I do.'

'Do you swear on your life?'

'Upon Christ and all his saints. Right down to your little shoes, baby.'

'Can't you get home tonight?'

'I would if I could,' says Bunny, groping around on the bed for his cigarettes, 'but I'm miles away.'

'Oh, Bunny . . . you fucking liar . . .'

The line goes dead and Bunny says, 'Libby? Lib?'

He looks inexplicably at the phone as if he has just discovered he is holding it, then clamshells it shut as another droplet of water explodes on his chest. Bunny forms a little

‘O’ with his mouth and he shoves a cigarette in it. He torches it with his Zippo and pulls deeply, then emits a considered stream of grey smoke.

‘You got your hands full there, darling.’

With great effort Bunny turns his head and looks at the prostitute standing in the doorway of the bathroom. Her fluorescent pink knickers pulse against her chocolate-coloured skin. She scratches at her cornrows and a slice of orange flesh peeps behind her drug-slack lower lip. Bunny thinks that her nipples look like the triggers on those mines they floated in the sea to blow up ships in the war or something, and almost tells her this, but forgets and draws on his cigarette again and says, ‘That was my wife. She suffers from depression.’

‘She’s not alone there, sweetheart,’ she says, as she jitters across the faded Axminster carpet, the shocking tip of her tongue protruding pinkly from between her lips. She drops to her knees and takes Bunny’s cock in her mouth.

‘No, it’s a medical condition. She’s on medication.’

‘Her and me both, darling,’ says the girl, across Bunny’s stomach.

Bunny seems to give this reply due consideration as he manoeuvres his hips. A limp, black hand rests on his belly and looking down Bunny sees that each fingernail has the detailed representation of a tropical sunset painted on it.

‘Sometimes it gets really bad,’ he says.

‘That’s why they call it the blues, baby,’ she says, but Bunny barely hears this as her voice comes out in a low, incomprehensible croak. The hand twitches and then jumps on his stomach.

‘Hey? What?’ he says, sucking air through his teeth, and he gasps suddenly and there it was, blowing up from his heart,

that end-of-things thought again – ‘I am damned’ – and he folds an arm across his eyes and arches slightly.

‘Are you OK, darling?’ says the prostitute.

‘I think a bath is overflowing upstairs,’ says Bunny.

‘Hush now, baby.’

The girl lifts her head and looks fleetingly at Bunny and he tries to find the centre of her black eyes, the tell-tale pinprick of her pupils, but his gaze loses its intent and blurs. He places a hand on her head, feels the damp sheen on the back of her neck.

‘Hush now, baby,’ she says again.

‘Call me Bunny,’ he says and sees another droplet of water tremble on the ceiling.

‘I’ll call you any damn thing you want, sweetie.’

Bunny closes his eyes and presses on the coarse ropes of her hair. He feels the soft explosion of water on his chest, like a sob.

‘No, call me Bunny,’ he whispers.

2

Bunny stumbles in the dark, groping along the bathroom wall for the light switch. It is somewhere in those dead hours, the threes and fours, and the prostitute has been paid and packed off. Bunny is alone and awake and a mammoth hangover finds him on a terrifying mission for the sleeping pills. He thinks he may have left them in the bathroom and hopes the hooker didn't find them. He locates the switch and fluorescent tubes buzz and hum awake. Bunny moves towards the mirror and its merciless light and despite the hot, toxic throb of his hangover – the dry, foul mouth, the boiled skin, blood-blown eyes and his demolished quiff – he is not displeased with what greets him.

He is afforded no insights, no illuminations, no great wisdoms but he can see immediately why the ladies dig him. He is not a toned, square-jawed lover boy or cummerbunded ladies' man but there's a pull, even in his booze-blasted face, a magnetic drag that has something to do with the pockets of compassion that form at the corners of his eyes when he smiles, a mischievous arch to his eyebrows and the little hymen-popping dimples in his cheeks when he laughs. Look! There they are now!

He throws down a sleeping tablet and for some spooky

reason the fluorescent light short-circuits, and flashes on and off. Bunny sees, for a split second, his face X-rayed and the green bones of his skull leap to the surface of his skin. Bunny says to the grinning death's head, 'Oh, man!' and throws down a second tablet and makes his way back to bed.

Showered, quiffed and deodorised, Bunny hunches over a tabloid in the breakfast room of the Grenville Hotel. He wears a fresh shirt patterned with oxblood lozenges and feels like shit, but he is relatively optimistic. You've got to be, in this game. He sees the time is 10.30 a.m. and curses to himself as he remembers a promise he had made to his wife that he would be back early. The sleeping pills still course around his system and he is finding that it is taking a certain amount of effort to turn the pages of the newspaper.

Bunny feels a ticklish interest around the back of the neck, a feathering of the hackles, and realises he has earned the attentions of the couple breakfasting on the other side of the dining room. He clocked them when he came in, sitting in the striped light of the louvred window. He turns his head slowly and deliberately and their eyes meet in the manner of animals.

A man with reptilian teeth, the bright spot of his scalp blinking through his thinning hair, strokes the jewelled hand of a woman in her mid-forties. He meets Bunny's gaze with a leer of recognition – they're both on the same game. The woman looks at Bunny and Bunny checks out her expression-free eyes, cold beneath her Botox-heavy brow. He takes in her bronzed skin, peroxidised hair and gelatinous lips, the freckled cleavage of her vast modified bosom, and experiences a familiar

tightening in his crotch. Bunny zones out for a while and then in a flash remembers the woman, a year ago, maybe two, in a hotel on Lancing seafront, pre-surgery. He recalls waking in a horror of confusion, his body smeared alarmingly in her orange fake tan. 'What?' he cried, slapping at his discoloured skin. 'What?' he cried, in panic.

'Do I know you?' says the man across the breakfast room, glassy-eyed and adenoidal.

'What?' says Bunny.

The muscles around the corners of the woman's mouth retract causing her lips to stretch laterally, and it takes Bunny a moment to realise that she is smiling at him. He smiles back, his dimples doing their thing, and Bunny feels a full-boned, bubonic erection leap in his tiger-skin briefs. The woman throws back her head and a clogged laugh escapes her throat. The couple rise from the table and the man moves closer to Bunny, like a skeletal animal on its hind legs, patting the breadcrumbs off the front of his trousers.

'Oh, man, you're a trip,' he says, in the manner of a wolf. 'You really fucking are.'

'I know,' says Bunny.

'You're out of this fucking world,' says the man.

Bunny winks at the woman and says, 'You look good,' and means it.

The couple exit the dining room leaving a sickly ghostage of Chanel No. 5 that compounds Bunny's hangover and makes him wince and bare his teeth and return to the newspaper.

He licks an index finger, flips a page and sees a full-page CCTV grab of the guy with the body paint, the plastic devil's horns and the trident.

'HORNY AND ON THE LOOSE', says the headline. Bunny

tries to read the article but the words just don't want to do what they were invented to do and keep breaking formation, reordering themselves, scrambling, decodifying, whatever, generally fucking around, and Bunny gives up and feels a mushroom cloud of acid explode in his stomach and blow up his throat. He shudders and wretches.

Bunny looks up and becomes aware of a waitress standing over him holding in front of her a full English breakfast. Cheeks, chin, breasts, stomach and buttocks – she looks like she has been designed solely with a compass – a series of soft, fleshy circles, in the middle of which hover two large, round, colourless eyes. She wears a purple gingham uniform, a size too small, with white collar and cuffs, her hair raked back in a ponytail and a nametag that says 'River'. As Bunny disimagines her clothes he thinks for a fraction of a second of a pile of custard-injected profiteroles, then a wet bag of overripe peaches, but settles on the mental image of her vagina, with its hair and its hole. He says, closing the newspaper with a careful, disbelieving shaking of the head, 'This world, I tell you, it gets weirder every day.'

Bunny taps at the tabloid with a manicured nail and looks up at the waitress and says, 'I mean, have you read this? Jesus.'

The waitress looks at Bunny blankly.

'Well, don't. Just don't.'

She gives her head a little jaded jerk. Bunny folds the paper in half and moves it out of the way, so that she can put the breakfast down.

'It's not something you want to read over breakfast, particularly when you've got a bloody cement mixer in your skull. Christ, I feel like someone actually *dropped* the mini-bar on my head.'

Bunny notices obliquely that a shaft of yellow sunlight has crawled across the dining room and moved up the inside of the waitress's leg, but because the waitress has started to jiggle impatiently, it gives the surreal impression that a light is short-circuiting up inside her dress or that there is a sort of seepage of luminance over the pale dough of her inner thighs. Bunny can't decide which.

He stares down at his breakfast, adrift in its sullage of grease, picks up his fork and with a sad poke at a sausage says, 'Jesus, who cooked these eggs? The bloody council?'

The waitress smiles and covers her mouth with her hand. Around her neck, hanging on a delicate chain, is a dragon's talon made of pewter holding a small glass eyeball. Bunny catches her smile, unguarded in her enormous, toneless eyes.

'Ah, there we go. A little drop of sunshine,' says Bunny, squeezing his thighs together and feeling a pulse of pleasure register around the perineum or wherever.

The waitress fingers her necklace and says, 'You want tea?'

Bunny nods, and as the waitress moves away, he clocks the sudden and self-conscious seesawing of her retreating haunches and Bunny knows, more than he knows anything in the whole world, that he could fuck this waitress in the blink of an eye, no problems, so that when she returns with his cup of tea, Bunny points at her nametag and says, 'What's that? Is that your name? River? Where did you get that?'

The waitress places her hand over the nametag. Bunny notices the frosted, achromatic nail polish she is wearing corresponds in a suppositional way with the non-colour of her eyes. They both have something to do with the moon or the planets or something.

'My mother called me that,' said the waitress.

‘Oh, yeah? It’s pretty,’ says Bunny, bisecting a sausage and forking it into his mouth.

‘Because I was born near a river,’ she says.

Bunny chews and swallows and leans forward and says, ‘Good job you weren’t born near a toilet.’

A crease of ancient pain ruckles around the waitress’s eyes, diminishing them, then they clean-slate, blank-out, and she turns her back and begins to walk away. Bunny laughs, apologetically.

‘I’m sorry. Come back. I was joking.’

The breakfast room is empty and Bunny clasps his hands together in panto-supplication and says, ‘Oh, please,’ and the waitress slows.

Bunny zones on the afterpart of her lilac gingham uniform and a glitch in the pixels of the crosshatched pattern causes time to deregulate. He begins to see, in a concussed way, that this moment is a defining one for this particular young lady and a choice is presenting itself to her. It is a choice that could mark this waitress’s life for ever; she could continue to walk away and the day would roll on in all its dismal eventuality or she could turn around and her sweet, young life would open up like, um, a vagina or something. Bunny thinks this, but he also knows, more than he knows anything in the world, that she will, indeed, turn around and willingly and with no coercion step into the slipstream of his considerable sexual magnetism.

‘Please,’ he says.

He contemplates getting down on one knee but realises that it is unnecessary and that he probably wouldn’t be able to get up again.

River, the waitress, stops, she turns and in slow motion lies back in the water’s drift and floats towards him.

‘Actually, River is a beautiful name. It suits you. You’ve got very beautiful eyes, River.’

Bunny recalls hearing on *Woman’s Hour*, on Radio 4 (his favourite show), that more women prefer their men to wear the colour maroon than any other colour – something to do with power or vulnerability or blood or something – and is glad he has worn his shirt with the oxblood lozenges. It just makes things that bit easier.

‘They go deep,’ he says, spiralling an index finger hypnotically. ‘Way down.’

He feels a simple shift inside him, and the miserable machinery that has been grinding mercilessly in his brain all morning suddenly and effortlessly self-lubricates and moves into something sleek and choreographed and he almost yawns at the inexorable nature of what he is about to do.

He throws out his hands and says, ‘Guess what my name is!’

‘I don’t know,’ says the waitress.

‘Go on. Guess.’

‘No, I don’t know. I’ve got work to do.’

‘Well, do I look like a John?’

The waitress looks at him and says, ‘No.’

‘A Frank?’

‘No.’

Bunny limps his wrist, goes ham-homo, and says, ‘A Sebastian?’

The waitress cocks her head and says, ‘Well . . . maybe.’

‘Cheeky,’ he says. ‘All right, I’ll tell you.’

‘Go on, then.’

‘It’s Bunny.’

‘Barney?’ says the waitress.

‘No, Bunny.’

Bunny holds up his hands at the back of his head and waggles them like rabbits' ears. Then he crinkles his nose and makes a snuffly sound.

'Oh, *Bunny!* Suddenly River don't seem so bad!' says the waitress.

'Oh, she's got a mouth on her.'

Bunny leans down and picks up a small suitcase by his chair. He puts it on the table then shoots his cuffs and snaps the locks. Inside the case are various beauty product samples – miniature bottles of body lotion, tiny sachets of face cleanser and little tubes of hand cream.

'Here, take this,' says Bunny, giving River a sample of hand cream.

'What's this, then?' says River.

'It's Elastin Rich, Extra Relief Hand Lotion.'

'You sell this stuff?'

'Yeah, door to door. It's bloody miraculous, if you must know. You can have it. It's free.'

'Thanks,' says River, in a small voice.

Bunny glances up at the clock on the wall and everything slows down and he feels the thunderous journey of his blood and his teeth throb at their roots and he says, quietly, 'I can give you a demonstration, if you like.'

River looks at the tiny tube of lotion cradled in the palm of her hand.

'It's got Aloe Vera in it,' he says.