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Brilliant & Forever

Written by Kevin MacNeil

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The Brilliant & Forever

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For Charlotte

‘He thought back on what had happened like a reporter. He started to answer, shook his head when he found he was wrong, and then started out again. “All there is to thinking,” he said, “is seeing something noticeable which makes you see something you weren’t noticing which makes you see something that isn’t even visible.”’

Norman Maclean, *A River Runs Through It*

‘One should be light like a bird and not like a feather.’

Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*

‘Goodness, like murder, will out.’

R. H. Blyth

If on a Summer's Night an Alpaca

On our island, everyone – human and alpaca alike – wants to be a writer. The standard greeting is not ‘How are you?’ but ‘What are you working on?’

On our island, everyone knows everyone. If you sneeze, ten people offer you a tissue, one prays for your soul, six laugh as though they’ve never sneezed in their lives, five secretly hope it’s the sign of a serious, perhaps fatal, ailment and thirteen people know it’s a cold and who you caught it from. A small island is a sad, safe, familiar, nurturing place. I grew up wanting to murder everyone with loving-kindness.

On our island, the air always tastes of salt, as though a person, you, has just stopped crying. The wind hurls rain showers around and it hasn’t snowed here for years.

You can’t survive life on a small island if you don’t have friends. Mine are Macy and Archie.

Macy Starfield works alongside me, scrubbing scummy plates and charcoaled pans in a rancid hotel kitchen.

Archie is an alpaca.

One night we were in the Lucky Golden Eel (‘Don’t go to other restaurants to be poisoned or cheated come HERE’), eating MSG with some food stuck to it. The Lucky Golden Ee, as we call it for short, is the third best of the island’s three

Chinese restaurants, but we're tired of the others, or they're tired of us, who can remember.

Archie swallowed some crispy calamari with grass sauce, made a face. 'Ugh. I wish they'd just serve grass with a grass sauce like I asked for. Why'd they need to fancy it up?' He's the greatest author alpaca-hood has ever had, which is a big deal for someone from such an oppressed species.

With a fluid hawking and a liquidy bulleting, he gob-shot a thick mess of phlegm into his private spittoon, parked semi-discreetly beside the pilau rice dish, which in turn sat beside Archie's stetson. (He calls the spittoon his 'cuspidor' and is fond of pointing out that James Joyce, 'who knew a thing or two about language', considered cuspidor the most beautiful word in the English language. There's a group of young upstart alpacas in the south of the island who've got a punk band called Archie's Cuspidor. Archie's already a cult figure among alpacas.)

Archie wiped his mouth with a grass-stained napkin and smiled, though in fact through a quirk of jaw genetics he always looks like he's smiling. 'This week I'm going to start a new catchphrase. Get it trending.'

'Impossible,' said Macy, ripping a naan bread to pieces. 'Hey, this piece looks like the Arctic,' she said, 'and this piece looks like the Antarctic.' She handed me the former.

'Arctic naan,' I said, enjoying speaking two words that don't normally go together.

Alpacas are regarded as second-class citizens by many humans on the island. The only thing they've ever got trending was the anti-alpaca demonstrations of '88, before trending was even a thing, but when fist-to-hoof combat was very much a thing.

'Possible,' said Archie. 'There was a guy who invented the phrase "the cat's pyjamas". And another guy who decided that

“like” could be used like “said”, instead of like “like”. Another guy changed the meaning of “gay” to “gay”.’

‘Yeah,’ said Macy, chewing Antarctic naan, ‘the original meaning of lesbian was “straight”.’ We paused, testing this information in our brain, but only because Macy is a lesbian and only for the splittest of seconds, then we laughed along with her. Macy knew suffering, and had an occasional edge, but hers was an upbeat soul really. She was a kind and thoughtful person who read widely and deeply and often. In literary circles there was a quiet conviction that her best work was ahead of her. She read everything with a pen in her hand and her bright black eyes moving at just the right speed. Macy meant it when she smiled and she smiled often; you felt safe in her company.

‘How,’ I said, ‘do you make it popular – the catchphrase, I mean?’ but at the same time as I asked that, Macy said, still chewing, ‘What’s the catchphrase?’ and I’m one of those people in life who is always overridden in simultaneous conversation so Archie cleared his throat and said, ‘It’s like a jazz thing you don’t get.’

Macy and I exchanged looks. ‘That’ll never catch on,’ said Macy.

Archie shook his head and offered Macy some rice. ‘You’re wrong. It’s got the cool jazz thing – jazz itself has two Zs, the grooviest letter in the alphabet. And plus it’s versatile. Listen.’ He started acting out scenarios while Macy and I chowed down on some juicy prince prawns and pilau rice. “Hey, I read *Ulysses*. It’s so boring I gave up.” “No, man. *Ulysses* is genius – it’s just a jazz thing you don’t get.” “Dude, I’m totally going to marry a supermodel.” “Nuh-uh. A supermodel’s a jazz thing you don’t get.” “I watched a *Family Guy* episode and didn’t laugh once.” “Only cos it’s a jazz thing you don’t get.”

‘Ain’t gonna work,’ I said, and took a huge drink of iced water because my mouth tasted like the seafloor but not in a good way.

Archie’s eyes looked sad though his mouth was grinning and there’s nothing like a crestfallen alpaca so I added, ‘But, hey, good on you. Give it a red-hot go. It’s a dodo egg’s age since I heard a new catchphrase. I’ll drop it into conversation this week, if, y’know, I have any conversations.’

‘I appreciate that, man,’ said Archie. We fist/hoof bumped.

‘Even though I do get jazz,’ I added. It was the wrong thing to say because it gloomed out Archie again and because it isn’t true. I like jazz – Dave Brubeck, Lady Day, Gary Burton – but I don’t get it. Jazz sends vivid colours streaming through my ears, is all, and that’s enough.

Macy and I felt sorry for Archie. Alpacas get lonesome and frustrated, and Archie was still distantly wounded from a divorce some years ago. There are two flocks of alpacas on the island, one in the north end of the island, the other in the south; his wife had been a northern alpaca. The flocks do not get on well with each other. Such, alas, is so often the way with minorities. Their animosity developed years ago, growing, as feuds frequently do, out of a minor disagreement over a John Wayne movie.

Archie didn’t have it easy, being a southern alpaca, with accent to match, living in a town in the north. (For example, if, say, someone is up to a shenanigan, they pronounce shenanigan as shenanigan in the north, but in the south they pronounce shenanigan shenanigan).

What began as a pity-and-tolerance friendship with Archie grew into genuine affection and whenever anyone made a slur like ‘camelface’ to him I was the first to defend him, with fists and, if necessary, witticisms. Well, okay, not fists. Or much in the way of witticisms. The intention was there, though.

We always tarried at the Lucky Golden Ee because although it was even less renowned for its desserts than its main courses and even though they liberally sprinkled MSG on their (bought-in) desserts, they served ice cream in these cute little hollow plastic robots.

Tan the Ageist brought us our ice-cream-and-MSG filled robots. We liked him; against house rules, he always let us keep the robots, though the professional dishwasher in me appreciated that repeatedly shoving a dish scrubber into every crevice of a robot's innards must be a grind. And any kind of grind that adds to life's general grind is suspect.

'Hey, Tan the Ageist,' Macy said. 'What you working on?' Here, as I say, literature is as important as a beating heart (my passport describes me as Professional Dishwasher and Author), and literature itself, or its interpretation, can stop hearts.

'Ah,' said Tan. 'Some terrible haiku.' He shook his head. 'Terrible. Vanilla ice-cream robot?'

'Terrible vanilla ice-cream robot,' said Macy. 'That really is a bad haiku. Joking. Looks . . . nice and roboty, thanks.'

'Who's your money on for the Brilliant & Forever?' asked Archie.

Everyone bristled at the mention. We all loved each other – hugs, support, doing things you don't like doing for the sake of your friends' happiness – but we were all undeniably involved, implicated, in the Brilliant & Forever.

The B&F is an annual literary competition by which reputations are made and writers unmade. It takes place on the Castle Green, a gentle verdant slope in front of the island's castle, and is the cultural highlight of the year.

Tan placed ice-cream-filled robots in front of Archie and me, sucked air through his teeth. 'Ahhh . . .' He cast his towards-the-mystical-horizon gaze at a dead light bulb opposite. 'Ahhh . . .'

Still, it was hard to look at him. Tan's skill, or curse, is to see, when he gazes upon someone, exactly what they will look like when they are old and/or verging on death. He's twenty-five. But when he looks at you or me for more than a moment he sees us as we will be when we are an instant away from death.

We suppose Tan just sees older versions of us, like masks, over our actual-age faces. It's a weird and beautiful tragedy. Tan has tried going out with girls, but will, he acknowledges, be a single man for a very long time. If he goes out with a girl and leans in to kiss her, he is suddenly confronted with a granny. He gets creeped and scarpers the hell out of there. Once, he dated a girl whose face aged negligibly; she died in a dreadful incident (champagne, chainsaw) three months into their relationship.

He has sworn not to go out with anyone until he himself is old. Hence the island has deemed him Tan the Ageist and, though the nickname is cruel, there is nothing he can do about it. Like ageing itself, some say.

'My money . . .' Tan paused. 'My money is on . . .'

'Yes?' said Archie.

'My money is not worth the paper it's printed on.' He sighed. 'But I'd maybe put it on Summer Kelly. Leave me a good tip, will you?'

'Sure, Tan, a good tip deserves a good tip,' said Macy. Tan nodded and moved away to a table of semi-raucous businessmen.

'This week,' I said, 'I'm hoping the gold I bought on eBay super cheap arrives and—'

'Wait, what?' spluttered Archie, looking every inch the flummoxed alpaca. 'How much gold - the postage alone - and it'll be fake—'

I nodded. 'Most likely. I ordered a bunch of gold ingots and I'm going to plant them in peat banks around the island.'

'Plant them,' said Macy, 'like they're going to grow?'

‘Bury them, I mean. So people will find them randomly when cutting the peats. If, you know, randomly has meaning, which I don’t think it does.’

Macy jammed her tongue inside her little plastic robot’s chest cavity and licked hard. Looked strange, like she was a giant.

Archie said, ‘After the first chunk of gold is found, everyone’s going to go digging for gold. The island will have a gold rush.’

‘Thus,’ I said, ‘boosting the economy. Hey, so maybe it is like planting gold.’

‘You want to boost the economy?’ said Archie.

‘No. Yeah. I don’t know. How does the economy even work?’

‘It’s a numbers racket,’ said Archie. ‘A lowdown dirty three-legged numbers racket.’

Macy stopped licking what was now non-existent ice cream from inside her robot and thumped the plastic toy down on the table like a declaration. ‘I want to ride a fishing boat out of the harbour and into dusk. Into dawn. Into rich fishing grounds. I’m going to become a fisherman. Woman. No more dishwashing for me.’

‘You can’t become a fishermanwoman,’ said Archie, ‘least not according to island tradition. Women have always been considered bad luck on fishing boats. You know that. Mother of God, even saying “woman” on a boat, they used to believe, and some still do, could attract danger.’

‘So what did fishermen call women?’

‘I don’t know. They called ministers “upstanders”. Ministers were bad luck, too.’

‘Our ancestors clearly had OCD,’ I said. ‘Hey, Archie, you’re not sexist?’

‘No, no. Hell no. If anything I see Macy as a trailblazer. But

you know how people will talk when they hear of a woman with a fishing boat.'

Macy shrugged, swatted the potential gossips away. 'Meh. Let them eat fishcake.'

'Where you gonna get a boat?' said Archie.

'Yeah, I'm gonna need serious moolah. Like a mil, mil five. I'll get a grant or a loan.'

'I'm impressed,' I said, thinking about it. I read a business manual once, until it depressed me. 'Try and get a grant instead of a loan.' I pictured how things could be. 'Hey, can we come ride on your fishing boat?'

'Sure you can,' said Macy. 'You can even help me think up new seafaring superstitions.'

'Being at sea's not right. We count on the world to stay beneath our feet,' said Archie. He spat into his cuspidor.

'The sea is part of the world,' I said. I changed tack. 'Superstitions. Right, it's going to be bad luck to bring a glockenspiel onboard. And if anyone ever mentions Dan Brown, they have to spin round three times on one leg, grab an anchor and jump overboard.'

'Yeah,' said Macy, 'and you can't say the word "horse". You have to refer to it as a "meat bicycle".'

Tan reappeared, looked at us, or one of us, or each of us, with a kind of sad misgiving, and placed on the table a saucer with three misfortune cookies.

'Thanks,' said Archie. I gritted my teeth. Tan vanished.

Macy breathed in audibly. 'You guys choose.'

'Believing in this stuff,' said Archie, reaching out for a cookie, 'is no more sensible than believing in the superstitious crap about women not being allowed on boats.'

Macy grabbed and cracked open her misfortune cookie. 'It says, "Quit professional dishwashing, though carry on doing

your dishes at home, and keep on writing, of course, but you must purchase a fishing boat. Go forth and fish. Slay those naysayers, if you're woman enough.”

I opened my misfortune cookie. ‘Mine says, “Achieve what you aim for.”’ I lied, since I thought Macy was lying. Mine actually read, ‘Do not Google yourself. Intention never truly hits the mark.’

‘What about yours?’ said Macy to Archie.

Alpacas smile a lot – like I said, some, like Archie, smile even when they’re not smiling. And it was an inscrutable smile that lit up or darkened Archie’s face when he said, ‘Mine says I will be torn to pieces in a painful, gory manner.’

‘Nonsense,’ I said, grabbing his misfortune cookie. ‘It doesn’t say that—’ I scanned the biscuit-gestated printout. ‘Okay,’ I said. ‘Okay. It does say that . . . But it also says that after the howling shrieking pain you will become still and solid and . . .’

‘And that’s all it says,’ said Archie, slumping down on the table.

‘There’s another word,’ I said, ‘but it’s in Pali.’ I squinted. ‘Is it? The word keeps changing. My eyes aren’t right.’

‘Torn to pieces,’ said Archie, glum once more.

I pulled at my collar, made a mental note to protect Archie from limb-wrenchers and decapitators.

Macy shifted in her seat. ‘All we really know is this; we’re going to go fishing. And slay those naysayers.’

I trembled with fear and excitement and too much MSG and a kind of simmering anticipation, like the kind you get when you reach the end of the first chapter in a book that feels much like your real-life future: uncertain; teasingly alive with potential (which could go either way); and peopled with diverse characters you feel you know, though we never truly know anyone because

they, like us, are continually changing. Come to think of it, you're not even sure that the book has a place in your future, but you are pretty sure that you have a future and that your future could be filled with wonderfully unpredictable things, including, though not necessarily, the book held for the moment in your living hands. Squeeze it and you feel your own pulse.