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Billionaires' Banquet

Written by Ron Butlin

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RON BUTLIN

BILLIONAIRES'
BANQUET



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Prologue

Edinburgh, Midsummer's Eve 1985

BARCLAY TOWERS WAS a split-level flat, four storeys above the Edinburgh streets. Four wearying flights of hard stone steps. The tenement was well over a hundred years old and when northerly gales swept down from the Arctic, its floor timbers shook, its large windowpanes billowed in and out like sails and, like a crow's nest lashed to the tallest mast, the whole top floor shuddered in the storm. That was in winter. Come summer the flat entered calmer waters.

For once, it was a hot evening and the window had been propped open. Five of them were crammed around the kitchen table in the alcove where the maid would have slept a century earlier. No maids these days, and so they'd helped themselves. When the Cat finally arrived, the special Midsummer's Eve spaghetti banquet was already over. She sat down. A candle was lit for atmosphere. Time for confessions, time to kill each other—

What's the biggest lie you've ever told?

Your biggest regret?

Who would you most like to sleep with that you haven't already?

Hume soon brought the search for after-dinner truth to a standstill. Said he'd been waiting for the right moment

*To Malcolm and Béatrice McCallum for their
unfailing friendship and support; for Anthony Pilley
and everyone who stayed at Barclay Towers or picnicked
on its roof; and for Regi, who picnics with me now.*

and could wait no longer. Jumped to his feet. 'Back in a sec.' Rushed out into the hall . . .

'Where do you think you're—?' the Cat called after him.

. . . and returned a few seconds later, wine bottle in one hand and flourishing the latest edition of *Thought* in the other: 'Howzat!' He held the journal open at a double-page spread: *The Appearance of Reality and the Reality of Appearance, Dr S. Hume, Edinburgh*. 'Snappy title, eh!' He uncorked the celebratory Don Cortez. 'This'll get me a job. A real one, a paying one. Mrs. Thatcher claps her eyes on it she'll make me her chief advisor!'

Midway through taking his bow Hume winked, and killed the Electric Boy. Then with a quick one-two, killed St Francis and the Coconut. *Bam-bam-bam*, he was on a roll. Job well done, he left them to enjoy life for a few seconds longer.

Because those were the rules.

St Francis was the first to peg out, giving his best theatrical groan before slumping facedown on the table. Officially dead. Head on the tomato- and pasta-flecked pine, the once-upon-a-time junior priest counted out the regulation *one . . . two . . . three . . .* Then sat up again, officially resurrected. At once, he glanced towards the door. Glanced at it urgently. Gripping the table more firmly than he'd probably gripped any priest-school altar rail, he took a deep breath. Cleared his throat, stood up. 'Goodnight, everyone.'

Just then the Coconut rolled her eyes and uttered a lady-like shriek that turned into a contented sigh as she collapsed into the Electric Boy's waiting arms. Having given up the ghost, she gazed upwards expectantly. The kiss of life?

As for the Electric Boy himself – first to be killed, but still

in the land of the living? Did their landlord consider himself one of the immortals? Hume took aim and killed him all over again. Direct hit.

Next, he turned his attention to the evening's first-time visitor – a friend of someone who'd been invited but couldn't make it. The instant black-haired, dark-eyed DD had come swaying in through the kitchen door with her midsummer smile and bottle of Blue Nun, Hume had locked on target. He'd launched into his well-practised routine of witty one-liners hinting at his more serious side, his hidden depths . . . and at bed.

Their glances met . . . and was that a *for-your-eyes-only* smile she'd just given him as he delivered the killer blow?

Back to the Electric Boy. Not still with us? Fucking McLazarus. Third time lucky. That was him eliminated, finished off, taken out. Dead, and no excuses.

Which left only the Cat, the last on Hume's hit-list. Taking aim and—

But she'd turned away to call after the no-longer priest: 'You'd better not keep me awake again half the night, Francis.'

'She speaks, she speaks!' cried the Electric Boy, who didn't need drink or drugs as he'd come into the world fully wired, and was so deep-down drowned in love with the Coconut that he'd clearly forgotten how to die. So Hume killed him again.

Then leaning across the table in one smooth unbroken movement, he was about to catch the Cat's eye when—

. . . she stabbed *him*. A vicious bee-sting of a wink. Venomous.

Killing *him*? But *he's* the—

She was pissed off.

Totally.

Because he'd been treating the lovely DD to some hospitable flirtation? But he and the Cat had their *arrangement*, didn't they? They were both free. Friends who frolicked and fucked, that was all. Not lovers. No love equals no jealousy. Has to.

Tonight, though, nothing could faze him. He'd be turning thirty next month and here, and not a moment too soon, was his first-time publication, the perfect alibi for his entire life to date. It vindicated six years' selfless dedication, commitment and round-the-clock study. Validation, if any were required, for the one-night stands he'd needed to get himself through. Forget trying to sublimate sex into ever-greater heights of analytical thought – he'd managed a month's consciousness-raising celibacy at one point, and nearly gone blind. But from now on, let the good times roll. No more signing on, no more on-the-side, cash-in-hand cramming ENGLISH FOR EVERYONE into roomfuls of foreign students. No more having to sleep in a cupboard. And so – Mr. Magnanimous – he raised his glass to toast the Cat as the evening's *femme fatale*.

It was then that new girl DD announced a MIDSUMMER MADNESS disco was being held on the outskirts of town, and did anyone fancy coming along?

Hume did, in spades.

The Electric Boy declined, which surprised no one as he almost never left the flat. *Ditto* the Coconut, whose recent skull-shaver of a haircut – intended to keep any stray strands out of open wounds and give the emergency room drunks that much less to grab hold of or be sick over – had gained her a new name, and *love*. After gazing deep into each other's eyes in a moment's wordless communion, the two of them disappeared to the attic upstairs. The Cat said thanks, but

she wasn't up to it. Still wiped out after her finals. Needed an early night.

Hume gave DD his best puppy-dog look, a puppy-dog eager for walkies. Just them then.

'It's on the edge of town,' she pointed out, 'but we've still time to get a bus.'

The puppy-dog all but rolled over.

Straining on an invisible leash, he glanced back before leaving the kitchen to offer the Cat a half-apology/half-promise: 'See you.'

'Sure.' She winked, getting him right between the eyes - a friendly wink this time, more or less. 'Have fun.'

Out in the hall, Hume opened the door of the understairs cupboard: 'Just a mo, DD. I'll get my jacket.' He clicked on the light.

She all but gasped. Surprise? Shock? Pity? 'This is where you . . . live?'

Side by side, the two of them stood in the doorway and contemplated the low stepped-ceiling effect created by the underside curve of the staircase rising to the attic flat above, the books piled uneasily beneath the line of shirts, jerseys and jeans hanging on their nails. His narrow mattress covered the entire floor with only an inch or two to spare. It was a snug, windowless, Occam's Razor of a fit, but the perfect accommodation for his low-rent, low-maintenance life. A life that was about to change forever.

'Moved in here on the very day Margaret Thatcher moved into Downing Street. Got everything I need.'

'And what's *that*? Modern sculpture?' She pointed to a hefty piece of sheet-metal that hung along the back wall, free to swing loosely in its iron frame. It might have been ideal as an

extremely large dinner-gong intended for an extremely large mansion, but not for a cupboard.

‘Ah, yes. That’s the Electric Boy’s.’ Hume moved into tour-guide mode. ‘You’d think something that size would make my room smaller, wouldn’t you? The paradox is – that *with* it, my room can become even bigger! Close your eyes.’

‘What?’

He lowered his hand in front of her face as if pulling down an invisible veil. ‘Close your eyes. Sometimes, DD, the world is so much vaster than it appears.’ Bending down to avoid the low ceiling, he stood on his mattress. ‘Infinitely vaster, in fact. Think Doctor Who’s *Tardis* to the power 100.’

He reached across and gave the dinner gong a firm thump with his fist. CLANG-CLANG-CLANG-CLANG-CLANG-CLANG-CLANG-clang-clang-clang . . . the one note seemed to fill the cupboard’s interior a thousand times over, suggesting the ever-greater reaches of boundless space lying far beyond.

‘Fantastic, eh? Great for those thoughtful moments when—’

‘When you’re feeling a bit cramped?’

‘That too,’ he conceded. ‘It’s a homemade echo chamber, wired to the recording studio upstairs. Gives me an occasional glimpse of infinity, you might say.’

Also, the smaller the room the more likely was the occupant to score. No need to mention that, of course. But it was true. Like the first time he’d met the Cat in the university library. Him straying from the Logic & Epistemology section along a narrow corridor of stacked shelves to track down an essay by Poincaré on scientific method, and her coming from the opposite direction in search of a commentary on Russell’s *Principia Mathematica*. Cartoon-like they’d backed into each other.

After mutual apologies, a quick chat about Poincaré and

Russell followed by coffee in the library's basement cafeteria, he'd invited her back. And fucked her. That was the great thing about his cupboard – no room in it to do anything else. Once the Cat herself moved into the flat, things had become even easier. Separate rooms, but spontaneous, no-strings siestas any time of the day or night. Their arrangement.

He unhooked his jacket from its nail.

'That's me and my glad rags, DD – let's go!'

As he clattered down the stairs to the promised disco and a let's-hope night of passion with DD, the apprentice philosopher felt a momentary twinge of guilt. *Unease*, rather, he quickly corrected himself. He'd gone off and left the Cat behind, alone in the flat – St Francis didn't count – in effect, abandoning her. Was she feeling sad, neglected? Lying slumped forward on the pine table as if she too had just been winked at and killed?

No, not the Cat.

And, anyway, he reminded himself, Wittgenstein had quite emphatically maintained that no one could experience another person's feelings, another person's pain. Close scrutiny of his unease would show only that he *cared* for her, which he did. Okay then . . . it followed that his sense of unease was not guilt, but genuine caring. He was feeling sorry for her at having to miss out on the disco. That was all. She'd been too exhausted to come out to play. She'd even said so herself.

So, no problem.

Besides, the two of them had their arrangement, didn't they?

He and DD had now reached the bottom of the stairs. 'Some Midsummer Madness, ma'am?' He held the street door open for her. 'Let's see how really mad we can be!'

PART ONE

RUNNING STRAIGHT AHEAD from the Barclay Towers' front door was a corridor – on the right the internal staircase that led up to the Electric Boy's recording studio in the attic, Hume's cupboard came next and finally the communal kitchen. On the left were bedrooms one, two and three – for the Coconut, the Cat and St Francis. The corridor ended at a frosted glass door – a small bathroom. All the rooms could be slept in; if the sleeper was well padded and under five foot four, the bath was reckoned to be very comfortable.

St Francis had the grandest room of all – a nearly intact cornice, a black marble fireplace, brass light-switches and polished floorboards. Whenever his bed was near enough the bay window, he'd prop himself up on one elbow to gaze out across the city rooftops or stare down at the busy main street and the tree-lined walks of Bruntsfield Links.

'Stunning view you've got!' Hume had commented as he'd helped him get moved in that first day, rejoicing, as a true philosopher should, at his fellow-man's good fortune. To the windowless cupboard-dweller, of course, *any* view would have been stunning.

St Francis had glanced quickly round. Would Hume mind lending a hand?

- bed over to the other wall
- desk and chair next to the bed

- wardrobe to stand opposite the fireplace
- and so on

Twenty minutes' push and pull later, the new layout was in place.

Or was it?

Having lost God, St Francis no longer took anything for granted, not even the furniture: 'Still doesn't feel *quite* . . .' Could Hume lend a hand, again? Please?

The movables were once more Laurel-and-Hardied to and fro across the room. 'Yes, I think that looks just about . . .'

Only to pause, glance round, then ask a moment later if Hume would mind lending a . . . ?

But Hume had run out of hands.

From the day he moved in, the former priest had kept his furniture on the move. By Midsummer's Eve his elegant wooden floor had come to look like an ice rink scored by the blades of a thousand skaters.

It was after he had been killed off and was resting head-down on the kitchen table that St Francis had glimpsed the perfect layout of furniture for his bedsit room – everything exactly as it should be, as it had to be. Next moment, his part in the Midsummer Eve's celebrations finished, he'd hurried back to his room and got straight to work.

The bed was dragged across the floor. The brick-and-plank bookcase was reassembled, relocated and rebuilt.

Status check?

Looking good!

Next, the bane of his existence – that two-door, double-coffin-effect tombstone of varnished gloom, his wardrobe. Victorian, cumbersome and too top-heavy for its own good.

He hugged the monstrosity as best he could in a fingertip embrace. Two half-steps, half-staggers later his fingers began to slip. He hugged it tighter. Another half-step, half-stagger backwards and—

CRASH!

He got out of the way just in time.

Quarter of an hour later, the job was done.

The room felt good, he felt good.

Good? Hell, he felt great! Then, precisely as in Brother Michael's catechism class when everyone had been told to sit in silent contemplation of the wonder and perfection of God, he relaxed in his armchair the better to gaze around at all he had accomplished.

It was almost with reluctance that he eventually reached for his *Mammoth Book of Crossword Puzzles*.

From time to time during the next couple of hours he indulged himself with an occasional appreciative gaze around the room. Then it was back to Puzzle Number 25.

Puzzle Number 25 completed, he moved on to Number 26. And got stuck. Seriously stuck.

He needed to *focus*, needed to concentrate. Again he glanced up—

His desk! What on earth had he been thinking? Next to that monstrous dark roar of a wardrobe, the poor thing was down on all-fours, almost cowering . . .

St Francis was so near tears he gritted his teeth. Clenched, swallowed. Month after month spent moving the same pieces of furniture around the same room, and he had achieved *nothing*. Absolutely nothing.

Once again his room's disintegration, its imminent collapse, felt as close as ever. He sensed the long night stretch

out before him like an unspoken threat and, beyond it, all the
nights to come . . .