LIBRIS | We know books

BLACK BAG

LUKE KENNARD

JOHN MURRAY

LIBRIS | We know books

1

If you met anyone as whiny, as disobliging and egocentric as the average narrator of a novel in real life you'd find them unbearable. You'd give them about five minutes before you excused yourself to get another drink, or moved to a different carriage, or asked to be transferred to an alternative department so you didn't have to work with them any more.

I'm not like that.

I love life. I love being alive.

Sometimes I don't. That's not unusual. You don't always love being alive. Nobody does.

I'm an actor.

That's just something I wanted to get out of the way at the beginning.

It is also why I will speak to you in the present tense. The silliest tense. And also the closest we come to talking directly to God.

I will have little choice over what I choose to include or omit.

I will be completely known.

At the moment, for instance, I am waiting to cross the road to meet my friend Claudio at a Middle Eastern restaurant called Indigo Mood. I am unable to cross because a double-decker bus has stopped directly in front of me and I am anxious in case, by the time I have negotiated the length of

LIBRIS We know books

the bus to slip between it and a black sports-utility vehicle, the traffic will start moving and I will have to hold my hands up in apology as I dash across, possibly into the path of an oncoming van in the next lane. The more I hesitate the more likely this becomes.

To skirt over my present reduced circumstances: I have not had a paid job in three months, and that was a murder-mystery dinner show (jazz age champagne-factory owner). I am a month behind on my rent and while I have found a way to pay this month's, the month in arrears squats on my shoulder and grins like a gatepost dragon. I am behind on most utility bills. I have measured out my life in coffees I cannot technically afford.

So when Claudio offers to buy me a falafel in Indigo Mood, a restaurant selected for its proximity to his flat, I accept.

He runs a hand through his curly black hair and tells me it's good to see me. It's been too long.

I tell him I know what his schedule is like.

Nah, fuck off, says Claudio. That's no excuse. I don't want to lose touch like that again. I need you to keep me human.

I'm not sure I'm the best person to do that.

Yeah yeah, he says. You're the most human guy I know.

Claudio and I get on well because we have known each other since the age of seven, which is to say thirty years, and we have, at some base level, no respect for one another: we do not fall for one another's hasty renovations of character or revisionist sophistications; we are not convinced by one another's adult selves. Before he found his place in the world, Claudio was, for me, a point of endlessly reassuring comparison: I may not have made much of my potential, but then there's Claudio. I may be useless with money, but then there's Claudio. I may have an addictive personality, but Claudio has

LIBRIS | We know books

literal, bona fide addictions. I imagine he still sees me in exactly the same way: as a seven-year-old. And, being financially if not culturally very secure, he likely sees the very same flaws in me that I do in him. Claudio. The Cloud. His mother was Portuguese.

How much do you think one of those costs? I say.

What?

I point to the chilled counter, dressed salads and swords of raw meat under glass, glistening bottles of fizzy drinks.

How much does a *commercial chiller cabinet* cost? says Claudio. I don't know? A couple of grand? Why?

I have found myself obsessed with how much things cost. I have become obsessed with money, I tell him.

Oh man, says Claudio. That's rough. That's not for you. You should be focusing on the life of the mind.

How long would it take me to even make the down payment on a chilled sandwich counter? I say. And then several years to pay it off, by which time it would have become obsolete and leaky and wouldn't keep things at the correct temperature and I'd have to find the deposit to buy another.

The thing is you don't *need* to worry about that, says Claudio. You are *never* going to be in a position to need a commercial chiller cabinet.

That's probably true.

I take a bite of my wrap. The tahini, the fresh mint leaves, the granular, yielding texture. The wrap has been assembled with such pride it almost brings me to tears.

Look, homes, these random fixations sound to me like generalised anxiety disorder, says Claudio, caused by the conditions inherent to late capitalism. If you'd let me loan you some money—

No.

LIBRIS | We know books

I could get you through this patch and you could concentrate on your work.

Ha, I say. You'd be like my patron.

I *could* be your patron, says Claudio. Think about it.

Claudio, at the beginning, had many patrons, but now he makes enough through ad revenue that he'd probably be okay if they abandoned him.

I could be your patron, baby, he sings.

I am not too proud to accept Claudio's generosity. I have never turned down a drink. But I do not borrow money from friends; it messes things up. Especially when you think it won't.

Actually, though, I say, I am on my way somewhere.

Work?

Yes.

You got a part?

An audition.

That's great! Stage?

More site-specific. About climate change.

This is really good news, says Claudio, and he means it, god bless him, and takes a bite of his wrap. Things are looking, how you say, up?

Things are looking, how you say, up.

LIBRIS | We know books

2

There was a time when a genuinely bohemian lifestyle was possible, by which I mean economically feasible. Where it persists now, it is only as cosplay for bored kids with private incomes.

My belly is full of falafel and wet, well-seasoned salads. The traffic parts for me like the Red Sea.

I have a small hoop earring. I keep my hair short because I have strong features. I try to have the utmost contempt for money, but the fact is that I must find £1,400 per month to cover my basic expenses: rent, utility bills, council tax. I could reduce this, negligibly, by taking a room in a shared house, but I am not the type, and value my solitude. Anything I make on top of £1,400 (an amount, I should add, which in my youth seemed an unimaginably large sum, an impossible fortune, but which now I must somehow come up with every four weeks) is for food, and I have cultivated an obsession for eating simply and frugally. Dense rye breads, dried fruits, porridge. I currently have a bowl of borlotti beans soaking in the kitchenette.

Clothes I receive twice annually: for my birthday (an end of summer baby, naturally, condemned to spend my entire education *small for my age* because I was almost a year younger than my immediate peers) and for Christmas (when the dominant are born) from my parents. I favour two pairs of immensely

LIBRIS | We know books

durable black jeans (which take over three years to fade and fray and require replacement), white button-down shirts and the occasional jumper. I have had the same overcoat since 2002. I'm wearing it now. I have learned how to repair pockets and sew on buttons on YouTube.

Holding a needle between my teeth and squinting at a faux-silk lining under lamplight is when I feel closest to some notion of the bohemian ideal.

I never go on holiday and have no interest in doing so, but early in my vocation I had the chance to travel, expenses only, to South America and East Asia, with a street-theatre group, long disbanded. In this sense I am very much a man of the world, a seasoned-traveller, someone with a broadened mind who has been exposed to other cultures, who knows and is true to himself because he now sees himself with absolute clarity.

An *Englishman*.

LMFAO, as they say.

You met that *Englishman*? He's so *English*.

What else do people spend money on? I like to drink, I ought to admit that, and cannot imagine any other way of transporting myself from the day into the night. I'm picky. A blended Scotch is perfectly acceptable as long as it's the right blended Scotch. I buy alcohol on a credit card and it is the only thing I use the credit card for. I pay off my 'tab' whenever I land a part that nets me sufficient funds.

My résumé is in innumerable piles on innumerable desks as we speak.

Little applications for indefinite leave to remain at the gates of heaven.

I stop to pick up a 20p piece at the side of a drain. I flick off a fragment of something black and slip it into my pocket.

LIBRIS | We know books

I am past caring but I am not past the vision of a future self, as real as any memory, a glass of wine on my verandah, reflecting on this, this now, as the low point of my career; giving an interview, on my verandah, to a quietly anxious journalist about how this was the low point of my career and how close I came to giving up. I'm not over that yet.

*

All of this is important. I am not important, but what I have to tell you is very important. Something is badly wrong. All hell is about to break loose. I see visions. We all do. I am not a pessimist, but something is very badly wrong and that which we held to be foundational is beginning to liquefy. The *bien pensant* opinion is that we have never been more divided; how sad it is that we are more divided than we've ever been, so sad. But that's not it. It's neither true *nor* sad and at the very least the things we commit to language ought to be one or the other.

Depending on your perspective I am probably, objectively, quite poorly educated. I sat in silent consternation while my teachers lost their composure with my more boisterous contemporaries, hour after hour, term after term. I developed an elaborate inner world I've never really left. You'll forgive me if I occasionally mispronounce a word. You won't be able to tell.

I check the walking route on my phone at the pelican crossing. Thirty-three minutes. I will reach the audition with sufficient time to stop sweating but not so much as to start fussing and doubting my worth. Good.

Something I love: plays. I love it when someone – a writer – has written a really good play, with characters and

LIBRIS | We know books

dialogue and a story which may be interpreted and realised by a director and a cast of actors in a theatre. Love it. I love all of it: the drawing-room farce and the discombobulating three-hour monologue with no fixed speaker. Good plays are probably my favourite thing in all the world.

I have nothing but disdain for the alternative.

Unfortunately the alternative is the most readily available work – my, as it were, bread and butter – and the more time I spend in exploratory movement and stillness, hot-seat improv, 'researching a stimulus as a team', collaborative enterprise, reflective logbooks, space / time / weight / flow, 'creating a unified vision as an ensemble', the more I say yes to such joyless and culturally moribund opportunities, the more such opportunities open up to me, like a giant origami flower made of tax returns.

The subject matter is always worthy: modern slavery; the long-term effects of early exposure to extreme pornography; zero-hours contracts. Who among the theatre-going public *doesn't* want their awareness of these horrors raised? Pried open, if necessary?

I feign enthusiasm, I give it everything, all the while feeling like someone is constantly slapping me in the stomach with an old brown shoe. All the while participating directly in the desecration of the one true art I live for. For subsistence wages.

I'm very cooperative and a good liar. Forty-five days of concerted effort, glorified trust exercises, listening and listening to each other, especially listening when someone says something demonstrably stupid or just plain wrong lest any of us be thought undemocratic; pages and pages that resemble less a play than a module-evaluation form or minutes of a local council meeting, drills and rehearsals, rehearsals and drills. Eventually, and with great collective dedication, to produce,

LIBRIS | We know books
time and time again, a show of such suffocating mediocrity I could cry thinking about it.

I balance these jobs with murder-mystery dinner theatre, which I find slightly less degrading.

LIBRIS | We know books

3

I am in a low room of white-washed brick walls, spider plants in little alcoves, halogens in the ceiling. A man with a big face and a beard sits behind a grey school table between a smart young woman in a voluminous green jumper and a man who has the face of a child, worn out at the crevices; a child who lives on a mountain. The usual plunging feeling that every human being is real, substantial and well-defined except for me. I dismiss this. Inverted vanity. Get over it.

Well, hello, I must be myself, they're grateful to me for coming in, my experience is impressive, just relax, they're going to do something a bit different.

When the director talks to his associates I cannot hear it – it dissolves into a mime. It seems important.

They'd like me to improvise.

They'd like me to—

The director seems suddenly perturbed.

I'm sorry.

I look at his ears to see if he is receiving messages from somewhere else. This doesn't appear to be the case unless his earpiece is very small.

As I know, the theme we'll be exploring is the climate disaster, the climate catastrophe. This is coming whether we like it or not, you know? What do I think about the links between the communal effort required to face the

LIBRIS | We know books
disaster, the catastrophe and the communal effort of staging a play?

Central, I say.

Central.

I think the parallels cannot be exaggerated. I think it would be impossible to exaggerate them.

Could I try?

Could I try to *exaggerate* them?

They laugh. Could I try to describe them?

We need to move as one mechanical arm, I offer. We need to operate like an artificial intelligence trying out several hundred permutations a second until we happen upon the right one.

He takes a note.

That's just brilliant, thank you.

They're going to try something new.

The director comes across not so much as a nice man as, for all the world, a man obsessed with how he'll be described in his obituary. I'll miss his twinkling wit. He even made coffee for the assistants. The world is a sadder place without him in it. That's the kind of shit he wants in his obituary. Who wouldn't? It doesn't make him special.

They'd like me to break the news of a flood.

A flood?

Right now.

Like Noah?

Whatever flood I like. Try to convince us.

I go completely blank. I stare at the single brown frond of the third spider plant from the left. I'm not sure how one tends spider plants – prunes the leaves or not.

In my own time.

Whenever I'm ready.

LIBRIS | We know books

I open my mouth. I open it wide. I release a single, undulating note. I alternate between my chest voice and my head voice. I increase the volume in inverse proportion to my uncertainty until I am singing, really singing.

The director and his associates stare at me; maybe they are trying not to laugh, maybe they are trying very hard to take me seriously. The director looks as though he has tasted something sour but wants to like it.

Then the woman brushes something from the shoulder of her green jumper, opens her mouth and begins to sing the same note. Then the child-faced man. And then the director. I look him directly in the eye. I go between the three of them, holding their gaze for several seconds each. We are not harmonising. We sing the same note – an E, is I think what I have arrived at – and we hold the note.

Then we all stop at exactly the same time.

Thank you.

And now . . .

Yes?

And now if I could announce the flood.

Ah.

I like to think I had already done so, organisms vibrating at the same frequency, a non-verbal call to action.

If I could, nonetheless, provide some dialogue.

After such a gamble I'm not sure I have anything left. I have mere seconds to decide between Old Testament prophet and operations manager. I'm not sure whom I'm even supposed to be announcing the flood to. My community? The *acting* community?

I take a breath to give the impression that I have been composing myself.

Oh god I just can't be bothered.

LIBRIS We know books

I think most of the people who choose to spend their free time seeing a play about climate change are probably already on board with the whole message, I say. And the idea that a *devised theatre piece* could reach anyone outside the customary audience for devised theatre pieces is clearly nonsense. So I suppose the real question is: if a theatre was gradually filling with water, soon to drown us all, would you rather see this piece of shit or *Hedda Gabler*?

The assistants both look at the director, one smiling, the other with his lips pursed.

No, this is good, the director says, writing something on his tablet with a little white stick. This is actually the kind of honesty we're looking for.

Oh, I say, great. Because this, if it isn't altogether beneath contempt, is a capitulation to the utter impoverishment of our own discourse to the point where we might as well not have developed the capacity for language in the first place. I hope we *do* all get washed away in a flood.

The director's stick clicks against the tablet.

We can use that, he says, then smiles.

All of that said, I would still also really like to be in the play, I say.

*

So how was it?

You don't need to check in on me, Claudio.

I pause at the entrance to a cornershop. I need a bottle of cooking oil, but I don't want to carry it.

Concerned about you, honey. I'm taking an interest.

I turn the volume up on my phone. Claudio is always quiet on the phone. I hit the button at the pelican crossing and wait.