

Disnaeland

Also by D.D. Johnston

The Secret Baby Room

The Deconstruction of Professor Thrub

Peace, Love and Petrol Bombs

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D.D. Johnston



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For Hart

“A credible paradise is far harder to invent. Whereas hells? They’re burning everywhere and we lit them ourselves.”

Allan Gurganus

Genesis – a Foreword

Chapter One

Three days after my son was born, I heard a voice. “Dinnae fret,” It said. “We’re just efter a wee bit of your time.” I knew The Voice was in my head, knew It couldn’t wake my sleeping baby. I was kneeling over his Moses basket, listening for his breath. “It’s a big ask,” said The Voice. “You dinnae have much time.”

I’ve been in England for twenty years, but I grew up in Dundale, Scotland, and I still speak Scots with folk back home. These words were in my language, but they weren’t my thoughts. Thoughts have been forming in my head all my life; I know what it’s like to have thoughts. This was different. This was like nothing I’d ever experienced.

It was the same for my girlfriend when the contractions started; she knew immediately that the sensations were unprecedented. That happened one evening in June 2020, on the crest of a heatwave that melted roads, as we were watching Agatha Christie’s *Endless Night*. We were paying more attention to my girlfriend’s abdomen than the telly, but I remember that an old woman was sharing a prophesy – she was chanting “Some are born to sweet delight/ Some are born to endless night” – when my girlfriend said with total certainty, “This is it. The contractions have started.”

We were seven days overdue and we’d had three false starts. For weeks we’d been interpreting omens, like ancient pagans: he would be born on the longest day, for his mum was born on the shortest; he would be born within two dawns, for I saw two deer on the hill;

he would be born tomorrow, for the first fruit has appeared on the bramble bush. But when it started for real, we timed and measured and recorded. By midnight, we'd dug in at the Aphrodite room in the Avera Birth Centre, Cheltenham.

If I did drop off, I would soon wake soaked with night sweats, convinced I'd fallen asleep with him in my arms. Sometimes I would lift him against my chest and carry him across the room, and only as I went to lower him into his Moses basket would I see that he was already sleeping there, and that in my arms I held nothing.

Then, on the third night, when I thought I could no longer keep watch, I heard The Voice. Don't be afraid, It said. Dinnae fret.

That was how it started. And bit by bit, over months, It revealed to me a near-future version of the town I grew up in.

You need to hear this prophesy.

Chapter Two

I'm writing this in July 2021. My baby has been on the Outside for longer than he was on the Inside. Lockdown has ended and masks are no longer compulsory. I haven't heard The Voice since March.

What follows is my attempt to quote the prophecy verbatim. During the nine months that The Voice spoke to me, I made thirty-seven books of notes, and in reproducing the story I've resisted editorial intervention or comment. The Voice spoke to me in English, but it was a version of English much influenced by the Scots language. I've tried to tell the same story in the same language, and performing this duty has brought me peace.

D.D. Johnston, July 2021

The Book of Milk & Wine

Chapter One

Dinnae fret. We're just efter a wee bit of your time. It's a big ask – you dinnae have much time – but it's a big story and aw. Imagine anither world, right – a world that's aboot tae end. And in this world there's a wummin called Donna McAdam, right, and like everybody else she's nae idea what's gaunae happen. So, an hour afore the power goes off forever, she's mair worried that they've run oot of milk: the wee light in her fridge disnae work and she's straining tae see what's in there – a rusty lettuce, a scabby ketchup, half-scranned cheese strings dried like auld laces, aw this.

She shuts the fridge, rests her heid in her hands, tries tae focus on her breathing. She's like, In and oot. In and oot. Count tae ten. She's got one of they calendars wi motivational quotes, and the slogan for February says, "Life is a story and it's up to *you* what happens next." It's up tae me, she self-talks. I've got this, she self-talks. "Ava," she calls tae her daughter, "I'm away oot for milk."

"What?"

"I says I'm gaun for milk."

But she cannae hear Ava's reply ower the bassline of their neighbours' shan music. The students in the flat above play Scottish grime aw night and maist mornings. Their music sways lightbulbs, trembles teacups, makes the plastic butterflies that hang fae Ava's bedroom ceiling dance in a swarm. *BOOM-tish-BOOM-tish-BOOM-tish*.

Oot in the stair, Donna can hear the lyrics and aw (you ken the sort of thing: "Me and my bitches, me and my team, smoking green in a

housing scheme”). She’s about tae hurry doonstairs when the auld guy fae across the stair – the Black Douglas, as folk call him on account of his personality – opens his door. See, Donna owes him money.

And the Black Douglas, right, is the dourest man in Scotland. Rhinophyma has swollen his nose, texturing it wi bumps and craters like some scorched planet. A Dallas moustache gies him a constant glower. And though the front of his heid’s bald, shocks of grey hair extend fae the back and sides. He looks like a nightmarish clown. “Goin oot?” he says.

“Just tae Ashrafs,” says Donna. “I’ve got nae milk for my daughter’s breakfast the morrow.”

The Black Douglas mutters that she’s nae chance of buying milk at nearly six p.m. and cackles at her as he backs intae his flat. She’s like, Fuck him. Fuck the– But she hauds it thegither. Breathe, she thinks. Count tae ten. Visualise a tranquil place. She likes tae imagine she’s sitting beneath this auld crab apple tree, looking ower Loch Rannoch at the cone of Schiehallion. She went tae Loch Rannoch as a bairn – there’s a photo of her there – but she cannae mind gaun and only kens the view fae the picture. In the photo, she’s wearing a pink shell-suit top and terry-cloth shorts. She’s scranning an oatcake, laughing, squinting intae the sun. Sometimes Donna looks at that wee lassie and cannae believe it wis her.

Chapter Two

Her grief wi the Black Douglas goes back tae the coronavirus. Four year ago, they had the same pandemic yous did, and at mair or less the same time, but they called the virus nCov20 no Covid-19. After *their* pandemic, leaders built border waws, raised tit-for-tat trade tariffs, expelled foreign diplomats, slagged one anither on Chatter. By late-February 2024, their trade wars are threatening tae become actual wars. There’s a US-Chinese naval standoff in the South China

Sea. There's power cuts aw ower Europe. Britain's accusing Russia of sabotaging the Forties Pipeline. It's mad.

But for the first five years that Donna and Douglas lived across fae each ither, they had nae mair contact than nods in the stair (and two noise complaints when Ava had the chicken pox). But during the nCov20, infected by an ootbreak of community spirit, she checked in on him, asked if he needed a hand wi his shopping. Efter that, he started plaguing her wi updates on his cronies' sufferings and deaths.

Then, at the end of last year, Donna discovered wet rot behind her bed. Douglas trades as a handyman, ken, and Donna wis hoping he might help her on the cheap. So, on Hogmanay, she took him ower a wee black bun. Tae her surprise, he invited her in tae toast the bells.

Well, Douglas has got this wee collection of whiskies, right, and he showed her aw the bottles, blethering aboot the nose of this one and the peat in that one. But he never offered her a dram, so they sat there in silence, dry as toast, watching *Hogmanay Live* on the BBC. Then, near midnight, he telt her a story fae his coal-mining days – the story wis about some guy that lost a leg during a tunnel collapse, developed gangrene, and eventually killed himsel wi a nail gun. The guy's body wis discovered only efter it caused a rat infestation.

Finally, it got tae midnight. Donna wis like, "Happy New Year!"

"I doubt it," said the Black Douglas. "But no matter; I'll no live tae see the end of it."

So, then Donna telt him aboot the rot. She said, "There'd been this smell in my bedroom for ages – sort of a fishy smell – but I'd thought it wis just something coming up fae the chippy. But you ken how damp these flats get. And so anyways the ither week I've tried tae move the bed, right, and I've seen that aw up the waw is, like, black mould, ken? Then as I'm trying tae clean it off, I've gone tae scrub the skirting boards, and the wood's crumbled like I dinnae ken what. So I've–"