

# Bad Star Back

*Our breaths mingle, maybe she is dead already. But I'm starting at the end, when I should be starting at the beginning.*

*I had to leave town in a hurry, there was a misunderstanding. An incident with a broken bottle. Easiest by far that I just got out of town until it all blew over.*

*So I went to John with my tail between my legs, he didn't like me, never liked me. He thought I was a pisshead, and he was probably right. But I never drank when we went out, and I was not enough of a pisshead for that to cause insurmountable problems. He huffed and puffed, and sighed and twitched, but we both knew that he would sign me on, so we went through the pointless charade, like monkeys establishing a hierarchy.*

*There were not many of us, just John, Jenny, the other John, Mike and myself.*

*John was in charge, he had tenure, in the sterile confines of academia tenure is god. Jenny went out with John, so that was pretty good for her too. I don't imagine that this was a particularly exclusive arrangement for him, with tenure, and god status, you could pretty much make up the rules to suit yourself, and no one would particularly object. The other John thought that if he brown-nosed and tagged along for long enough then one day he too would get tenure. He had been a moderately promising student a long time ago, now he has pissed away even more of his life than I had. Waiting for the modest crumbs that fell from the table, forever scuttling about on the bottom rung of the ladder, fated to never climb that ladder, and too long there for anything else to ever be practical. And Mike kept the Landrover running. Oily and quiet, never said much. He was the best of us.*

*Of course there was no real opportunity to speak of. We were a million miles away from anything that mattered. Some longitudinal geo surveys had been running since nineteen oatcake, and no one had the balls to pull the plug on them. Of course the methodology was questionable, the data almost certainly worthless, and never cited, but still it was collected routinely. I had come out here with the rest of them, and had drifted away, dispirited by the utter pointlessness of our existence. Infected with that pointlessness I had simply drifted on, drinking too much, and before long, had rendered myself too poor and talentless to manage to get away. And in the way of these things, it must have been what I had wanted.*

We assembled at a rendezvous on the edge of town, I had a single shapeless canvas rucksack, and a rigid metal case for the cameras and lenses. As long as I failed to lose them, I had a slender means of support. I was early, I always am. The other John arrived next, and looked at me sullenly, as if any association with someone as disreputable as myself was a personal affront to him. I persisted in making small talk on the grounds that I knew it was annoying him, and the more sullen he became, the more polite and reasonable I became. Then Mike came along, and as Mike and engines went together like two sides of the same oily coin, the Landrover appeared next. John and Jenny were in the front seats.

Still buoyed by my chirpy good nature, I asked for a window seat, and was met with such sullen silence that I just mooched from then on. John made a point of kicking at my rucksack, expecting it to clink of bottles, although he knew that I never took alcohol on any of these trips. We sat in the back, John driving, with Mike beside him. The rest of us in the back like queezy children.

I hate travelling, we stopped after half a dozen miles, although I had been asking for a stop for most of them, and I threw up royally. Nothing to do with the drink, I just cannot travel. However the rest went back to sullenly ignoring me. I did not care. I felt like death warmed up, my stomach heaving, and my head throbbing. I did not care one iota about them, and barely cared whether I lived or died. There was a reason I had dropped out of these trips.

Pissing against a sand dune, piss uncovering something in the sand. Not a stone, not a lizard. Too still for a lizard, I stopped peeing on it, and pulled it out, getting my hand wet. It was a carving. Not just any carving, it was a lizard, but not like a carving. It was too realistic, like a lizard caught in a photo, artless and still.

I took it back to the Landrover. The others were unimpressed. Maybe they thought I had bought it in the market before we left. On my lap, I looked at it. There was something deeply wrong about it. This was not something that someone had made, not someone human. It was too strange and everyday, god had done this.

////////////////////////////////////

It wasn't a routine trip at all, that was why John had not been too choosy about me coming. He needed someone with the cameras I just came along with them. Back in the old country, where they read papers that are new, and can drink water out of the taps, a comet or something had been tracked. We were closest to it by a long margin, and they wanted someone to go out and have a look. Of course it was nothing to do with us. And in academic tradition, knowledge comes in two depths, infinite or zero. That was not our field, so we knew nothing, and cared less. But funders paid his wages, and you could sell a network of trained and flexible scientists to funders, so John had to borrow some equipment, head out into the desert and pretend to like it.

I did not have to pretend anything. Neither did the others, but at the end of the day, we got an overgenerous daily rate, and we never did anything but hang around, so we came along too.

////////////////////////////////////  
We were only a day out and things started to go wrong, nothing you could put a finger on. Jenny looked out the windows like a woman possessed. Her eyes tracking back and fore following things we could not see. At first we had asked if there was anything out there, what she saw, but all she did was complain about the brightness, and look out all the more.

John pulled out a coffee sticky geiger counter, switched it on, it went off the scale. Then he switched it off and back on, and it just registered background radiation. He put it back in its box, and never took it out again.

Mike took to spending more and more time each night with his head under the bonnet. We always travelled by the grace of Mike, but the Landrover was a tank, it should have been gobbling up these miles. Instead it lurched and grinded on, the electrics seemed all shot to hell.

We each retreated into our own private worlds. I felt like I was dying, I always do when I travel. I did not care. The others, had their own private torments to contend with.

////////////////////////////////////  
We ate our meal of baked beans, flakey and dry. The sky darkened, as the modest fire started to dwindle. I had gathered some dried scrub earlier, simply for something to do. There was no point in saying that we should give up, they all hated me, and saying it, would simply manoeuvre them into wanting to go on. Best to just remain quiet. Jenny was wall eyed with panic, gazing into the dark following imaginary shapes out there.

The other John spoke first, "I know that this is important and all, but it's not as if it is core project or anything."

He waited for some faint echo of support, finding none, he reluctantly pushed on. "It's not as if we are expecting to find anything, bit of a wild goose chase, and all that. If we damage the equipment or anything, we do risk scuttling the core project. You know what a comet is anyway, just a dirty snow ball, what we going to find out here, some burnt dirt if we're lucky."

John's eyes narrowed, he had not reacted when the other John started to speak, and it was not clear now whether he had heard him or was indeed replying to him now. "This place is tough, tougher than tough. The hardest, harshest environment in the world. If there is something here that needs done, we do it."

I stood up and walked off into the dark, we were going on. That much was obvious.

=====

Next day we found her. Driving along one of the flatter bits, a pile of rags, fluttering in the wind. But we stopped, and in the rags, congealed with blood, she lay. Skin wrinkled, like something old and worn smooth by time, she lay just moving, like a cat breathing.

The others were indifferent to her, you often found the dead or the dying out here, I had a bottle of water, and tried to move her into a position where she could drink. We did not have much water to spare, and she was as good as dead anyway, it was a pointless gesture. The others had decided to take this stop as an impromptu toilet break. That was cold, even for them.

Moving her head, something fell onto me, something heavy. I moved the rags, there was something amongst them, like a stone, I picked apart the scabbed rags, it was stone, peeled of the cloth, it was stone, something carved, like a hand. She was holding a carved hand. Probably found it out here, and thought it might be worth something.

I pulled at it, but she held on tight, ...

Then I realised, she was not holding the bloody thing, it was attached to her. Her hand was made out of stone. Pulling back her sleeves, tearing at them, her arm changed to stone, and her hand was stone, too bloody to tell what kind, but smooth and old, no wonder she was dying.

Her people had left her out here to die. No wonder, what could you do, what can any of us do, faced with such things.

=====

We argued a lot then. But I thought John was an idiot, I can't be bothered with most people, John even less. He thought I was worthless. It was not much of an argument. I wanted to take her, he wanted to press on. The others said nothing. Jenny still wall eyed with panic, Mike tinkering with the Landrover electrics, the other John, something dead in his eyes, like he knew something, the ship was already holed below the waterline, but the captain was blind to it.

He hauled my rucksack out the back, it fell heavily, pulled out the cameras and threw the back gate shut again.

The deal was that they would come back to pick me up. We all knew it was a lie. There was little chance of finding me again. The Landrover was on its last legs.

=====

I could have watched the Landrover disappear into the distance, that would have been dramatic. I didn't. I checked the water that I had been hiding in my rucksack. That was why I had so much stuff lying loose in the back of the Landrover, I had been stashing water almost from the outset. Of course I had not been planning for this. Just another pointless act of rebellion.

The loose clothing, and paperbacks, John had kicked them out onto the sand. I gathered up my stuff.

Here I was. Here I stayed.

I cradled her head. Her eyes were cloudy, her breath was like the tide lapping.

=====

That night I burnt much of what I had. It was cold, I did not expect to last another day. A little comfort. Looking deep into the burning papers, and clothing, that cloying sooty smoke. I was so beyond tired, so beyond sore. Then looking out beyond the fire, I began to see what Jenny had seen. Shapes, without shape, coloured without colour. Like some mathematical function performed on our reality. I was seeing something out there, something I could not understand, it had no sense, beyond the sense that it was huge and unknowable.

It was not dangerous. It was just totally indifferent. The cliff edge cares not whether you throw yourself off it. It is completely indifferent to you. As was this. It was alive in the way that the sea is, or plate tectonics, alive but so completely alien, that it is whole orders of magnitude unknowable.

I could feel Jenny in my mind, she was scared of it, she saw something you could neither understand nor master. There was panic in her. Panic so unreasonable and vast that it dwarfed everything else. She lived in a world of panic. A world coloured by panic, that tasted of panic. A fearful world, forcing her in on herself, turning her inwards, and making her pebble small.

The fire died before the soot did. We were black with it, it lined out mouths and noses, I started to cough.

=====

I started to cough, I retched and it felt like something was tearing, and then all of a sudden, a flush of mucus and blood, and in it a pebble. But not just a pebble, it was the same as her bloody hand. I was coughing up stone.

She turned slightly, and spoke,  
"Bad star, bad star back."

I fell back, this body was broken and dying, it was time for a new one.

The sand dunes swithered in my sooty eyes, the comet was turning us to stone, the comet had been here before, it had turned us to stone before, long ago, countless times, times beyond times, we had all turned to stone before. We had turned to stone, and been worn down, worn down to sand, the sand around us.

Her people had not abandonned her, they were here with her, all around her.

////////////////////////////////////

I began to feel peace, I could not fight the ocean tides, but I could see them for what they were, and see my place in them. Rich and strange, infinitely rich and infinitely strange. I felt a peace that was beyond language, beyond meaning. I drew breath, and cradled her head, our breaths mingled, as the strange began to seem commonplace, and the commonplace strange, letting go, I no longer felt the tide tugging, as it started to carry me.