

# LITRO 62

# WHO LOVES YA, BABY?

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my eyes. He was bending over and grabbing me around my waist.

'Are we going to walk today, John?'

I felt a surge of optimism run inside of me: 'I will!'

Barty started to pull me up from the chair. He was sweating, and as I looked down I could see a film-perspiration of glue settle around the edges of his Basil Brush toupée.

He pulled me up so my feet rested on his new carpet. I looked down at them as if they didn't belong to me: dead feet in brown hush puppies. I noticed the regular paisley patterns of the carpet and saw, peeping from underneath, a small brown label: 'Made In Britain'.

Barty was struggling. 'You'll have to help a bit, old son, or I'll let you go.' I tried to get some purchase into my legs, but only succeeded in falling further into his arms. He tugged me round so that we were like two punch-drunk boxers embracing clumsily after a fight. Suddenly, I felt a sharp pain in my left foot; the heel of Barty's crocodile shoe imbedding itself into mine.

'Sorry, John, it's not working. The voices are going away now; I'll have to put you down.'

But I clung in there, in the same position, and held him stronger so our celebration could carry on; all the while hoping his heel would continue to press on my foot. It was the first sensation I had felt down there in weeks and I didn't want it to stop. Then, in the corner of my eye, I saw Kenneth throw a big right punch from out of a picture on the wall. I stumbled forward as if caught in its slipstream. Barty followed, clutching his magic reviving sponge, as the carpet loomed towards me.

It may not have been a Persian but it felt surprisingly soft and luxuriant. As I lay there, Mister Savalas boomed a question down from the desk: 'Who loves ya, baby?'

'I do,' I thought, 'and I love you too, Barty.' And Barty's plastic crocodile slip-ons responded with a slow Ali shuffle beside my head.

## LITRO

This story comes from Alan McCormick's recently completed collection, *DOGSBODIES*. He's been the recipient of an Arts Council Writers Award and his stories are published widely in literary magazines and on the net. He recommends visiting [www.deadrunkdublin.com](http://www.deadrunkdublin.com), which is presently showcasing a collection of his work.

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'Barty.'

'Well, Barty, I thought you sent for me.'

He removed himself out of his chair and walked slowly around the desk. He took off his jacket, loosened his tie, and bent over to pull my chair round so I was facing him. 'They did. They sent for you.'

I saw a picture of Henry Cooper with a young Muhammad Ali. Ali was feigning being hit by a right uppercut to his chin. They were both wearing suits. It was probably taken at a pre-fight press conference. 'Was that at the time of their first fight?' I asked.

'Let it go, old son. I've got their feeling in my fingers. Free yourself, let them into you.' Not Henry or Muhammad: it was that *other them*, it was *their* energy waiting to spill from Barty's fat fingers.

Barty gripped my face and stroked a heat into my temples. 'Relax,' he cooed. I felt my body go limp; a glowing red ball rolling into my spine and down my legs. 'Don't fight it, don't think about it,' Barty urged with a whisper into my ear. His breath was hot. I couldn't resist any further and slipped into a deep sleep.

A small, white, thin man was walking out of a tunnel of light. He was banging two large red boxing gloves together. It was quiet as he climbed through the ropes and into the ring. A spotlight from above covered him as he skipped around the ring, throwing shadow punches. Suddenly, I was there too, slumped on a stool in the opponent's corner. I could feel helpful hands from above, kneading my shoulders.

The young boxer addressed me: 'Are you going to sit there all day, or have you come here to fight?'

I felt rooted to my chair: 'I can't get up.'

'Yes you can, feel the ring.' I looked confused. 'Barty's ring, you twit,' he said.

The hands that had been on my shoulders moved onto my neck. I felt the dig of a ring finger. 'I can feel it, I can feel it.'

'Well get up, then.' He came towards me.

'Kenneth, is it really you?'

'No, but I'm glad you met him.' It was Barty's voice. He was breathing hard. I opened

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Bartholomew Diaz was fat with feeling, chunky fingers rat-tapping on his desk, his right-middle one rolled in twenty-two carat. His voice was coffin-like – solid mahogany, yet shiny, appealing, even fanciful: satin lined with shiny brass ends to pull his grand opinions into view. His handshake was firm to the point of intimidation, and his eyes were a piercing lighthouse blue with a flash of red skimming under their irises.

Mister Bartholomew Angel Diaz: that man promised me everything. He sold me prosperity and pointed to a long life ahead. He said it was written on the moon like the music of star-crossed lovers in a Frank Sinatra sky.

I met him first in his legendary Stepney gym. He was, is, a boxing promoter; old school type. He knew Jarvis, the two Barries, Gerald 'The Gent', 'Our Henry', Mister Wong (from Hong Kong), and all the boys from the Old Kent Road. On the wall there was a photograph of him, younger, more streamlined, standing between Alan Minter and Charlie Magri – old champs from long ago. In the picture, Bartholomew's head had an impressive ginger-felt overlay, whilst his teeth were firm white pillars, his smile gratuitous and wide; upper molars sharp like golf tees. On the right side of his desk stood a gallery of faces, including the holy female trinity – Mother T, Margaret Hilda T, and a faded looking Golda Meir. Pride of place, at the desk's centre, was a signed photo of Telly 'Kojak' Savalas, with a hand-written message scribbled underneath – *Who loves ya, baby? A real swell Party, Mister Barty, Telly*. And below his signature, in different ink, someone had added 'Telly from the telly.'

'I'll have you and your good lady – Brenda, is it? – two ringside tickets for the big one – meal, wine, the works. I'll get Michael onto it right away.' He picked up his phone and dialled, all the time looking carefully at me. I'd just finished re-figuring his finances. I hadn't received any

money yet but was pleased with his promise of a pre-payment bonus. I was a little unnerved by his constant stare though.

He put the phone down. 'Not there, but it's all in hand. Got a tux, John, have we?'

'Not one that fits.'

An Emperor's disdainful wave of his hand told me I needn't worry.

Suddenly he was out of his chair and nimbly (he had a sort of grace with his body) rearranging his bulk onto the table in front of me. He looked me over: 'Light-heavyweight, five-ten, 32 up to the danglies? My old pal, Austin, will see you right.' Then he leaned forward and took my wrist in his hand and felt with his index finger for my pulse. I inhaled deeply, not sure quite what to do. A minute passed.

He let go. 'John, old son, I'm told you should be taking things easy from now on.'

'What do you mean, Mister Diaz?'

'Barty, call me Barty.' It was then that he told me about the voices. 'A calling; they call me, I listen. You remember young Kenneth – white welterweight, Southern Area Champion, big hands? I got him a swipe at the national title. Always carried a heavy punch. Those lovely big hands, you see.' At this point, Barty's voice got more emotional, a little squeaky: 'So he stood a good chance. Round one, he gets hit with a rabbit behind the head. Fell like a beech tree in a hurricane.'

I wasn't familiar with the name but I remembered the story and its outcome from the papers: 'Is Kenneth the boxer who died?'

'Died? Well, he did and he didn't. You see, he talked to me when he was on the canvass.' As Barty spoke, I glimpsed a photo in the corner of the room I hadn't seen before: the Dalai Lama in pale orange robes. He seemed to be winking at me.

Barty caught me looking. 'A lookalike, I'm afraid: Brian, a Basildon Baker. Not even a

proper chink, but a nice guy, nonetheless. A Buddhist too.'

'What did he say?'

'Brian was inscrutable, never said a thing. Kenneth? He told me he was fine and to look after Sheila.' Barty pulled out his wallet and showed me a creased photo; himself with meek-faced white greyhound. 'Silly bitch never got near a rabbit's backside, only ever finished ahead of its own tail; but I took care of her just as I promised. The point though, dear John, is that Kenneth was out for the count, dead as wood, neck broke, before he hit the floor.'

'But you said he spoke to you.'

'He still does. Others too. A chap called Ray has just been talking to me about you.' Barty gave me a serious stare and his voice became a little flatter, a little Harold Steptoe: 'Raymond,' (so naturally it was Raymond now), 'suggests you visit your doctor. Mention your tiredness and the pins and needles in your feet.'

I was shocked at his intimate knowledge of symptoms I'd only recently begun to notice myself. Before I could collect myself, to ask Raymond to explain, Barty put a giant Doctor Evil palm up to stop: 'we can't tell you anymore, old son. Just leave off the alcohol and caffeine, and drink plenty of water and green tea.' And with this, he dropped himself and his crocodile slip-ons onto the carpet, and walked out of the room.

'What the hell's green tea?' I thought. I looked round for inspiration. The Basildon Lama, as Barty had intimated, was unable to help. Mother T remained typically tight-lipped. Kojak though, on closer inspection, was sucking a lime-green lollypop. I left, wondering to myself if Telly had ever whispered 'who loves ya, baby?' in Barty's ear. And, if he hadn't said it when he was alive, maybe he'd say it now, to me, through Barty; just for me.

†††

I never made it to the big fight, not because the tickets didn't arrive; although they didn't. New symptoms arrived in many forms over the next few months: burning, stinging pains down my calves like I'd relieved myself in acid; then the cold, a terrible cold in my extremities – fingertips like icicles, feet like bags of frozen peas. I felt so tired, and no longer a light-heavy (try middle, and shrinking); all the water from my body sweated out – my puny frame had gone

eight rounds with George Foreman in Zaire, only to lose. I was shaking, flat out against the ropes.

'Dreaming again?' said Brenda as she came in to change my sheets. 'Feels like Apocalypse Now in here,' she said.

'Rumble in the jungle,' I replied.

'Not sure I follow, John.'

'I was talking to Muhammad.'

'Well, you know who I'd like you to talk to,' she said.

And so it was, following one of Brenda's pep talks, one she'd often repeated, that I phoned Mister Diaz. I didn't want to, but as she pointedly put it: what had I got to lose? Lying on my back, with a rubber gum shield, my dry swollen tongue, pushed up into the roof of my mouth, I had nowhere else to go. He wasn't surprised to hear me, or how I sounded.

'When did it start?' he said.

'Not long after I saw you.'

He asked me about my doctor, my weight, my bowels, and whether I'd followed his advice about the green tea. I wondered if I lied, and said yes, that the voices might tell him the truth. I tried to evade the question by saying I'd given up coffee.

'Glad to hear it, old son; it's rocket fuel for people with no heart', he said. 'Now tell me how tired you feel.'

'Like a granny in a sauna,' I replied.

'He says he feels like a sweaty geriatric,' he said, talking to someone else.

'Have you got Raymond with you?'

'Who? Oh, I see. No, I'm speaking with my good friend, Mister Goldman. He won't mind me telling you that he's been VIP at all my better promotions.' I was silent. 'And who is Mister Goldman, I hear you wanting to ask: only your medical saviour. He's a neurologist at Barts, but will be seeing you on Monday at 37 Wimpole Street, eleven o'clock; don't be late.' And with that the phone went dead.

Brenda was looking at me to find out what he'd said.

'I'm not sure, but he wants me to see a friend of his.'

'You will go?'

'I'll think about it.'

†††

Mister Goldman, Archibald by Christian name, was a tall long suit (pinstriped) with a daunting way of leaning forward when making a point. Emphatic like an exclamation mark (upturned,

with a small head): a crescendo of energy that leapt out of his mouth and got stronger with each conclusion: 'Tired, very, mm; pains down legs, mmm; pins and needles, patches of skin with no feeling, mmmm; losing control of legs, mmmmm,' a big telescopic movement of his head over his desk and towards me, and a pelleting of spit: 'I think we'll get you in to have a proper look. Give you a good once over, mmmmm!' All the while, he'd been tapping a 2B fast on the walnut veneer. Now he slowed up and pressed it firmly into the desk. The tip broke: 'Don't look so worried, we'll put you back in one piece.'

Then came the hospital – and tubes, lots of them; tablets, the same; veins pricked and tunnelled; blood taken, later put back in; skin pinched, prodded and gouged; knees and joints repeatedly tapped with little hammers; soles of feet scraped with a long, sharp something or other. It was said to be a good sign when it tickled. Giggling stopped after week one.

Brenda came and sat by my bed every afternoon. Sometimes we spoke. 'I feel funny in the head,' I said.

'There's nothing wrong with your head,' she said.

'It's like it's floating on the ceiling.'

I sank back into my pillow; temples hot. Curtains of frustration closed in front of me; eyelashes of forest foliage let in a spidery light. Brenda was a small red baboon. I was a monkey expert.

She was getting up to leave. 'Sweet dreams, John,' she said.

I roused. 'I wish, I wish I...', but I couldn't finish the sentence.

She bent over to kiss me. 'You'll be as right as rain when you come home.'

Drops specked the grey window behind my head. I couldn't see, but I knew: I could feel the damp in my eyes, a trickle collecting on my cheekbones like toy lava on a Thunderbird mountain. I saw the catheter, a see-through snake, coil itself out of my covers. My bladder felt ready to let go as Brenda, my small red baboon, bounced out of my room.

†††

When I got home I was a zombie on four soft wheels.

'We should have pumped up the tyres before we left,' Brenda was saying as she levered me and my chair in through the front door. We were

returning from a trying outing; supermarket bags clasped on my lap. We had fought. I had been mean with helping to choose the shopping. I had caught myself saying: 'I couldn't give a shit what we buy.' It was true but I shouldn't have said it. Now Brenda looked tired. I wanted to console her but she beat me to it.

'Oh, John, you're like skin and bone.'

I tried to say 'sorry', but could only feel my teeth move loose in my mouth like an oversized set of wartime dentures. I looked up at her. She smiled and took the bags off my lap.

A man's shadow appeared and then got bigger on the frosted glass of the front door. He rang the bell: the Strauss theme from 2001 (Brenda's idea). I opened the door and looked up. He was big and black. He wore a small, grey chauffeur's cap and spoke in a low voice: 'Mister Barty would like you at the gym.'

Brenda panicked. 'He can't, he's much too tired.' Brenda had given up on Barty's mystical life-changing powers at this point.

The chauffeur began Barty's request again: 'Mister Barty would like...'

I slipped my rear off my chair and used my arms, elbows out, to lower myself onto the carpet.

'What are you doing, John?'

'Don't worry, Brenda.' Then I addressed myself up to the chauffeur: 'the wheels are gone – legs too, I'm afraid. You'll have to carry me to the car.'

He scooped me up, walked me down the path, and gently deposited me on the backseat of an arthritic looking yellow Bentley (registration B A D).

†††

Barty was beaming behind his desk. The chauffeur lowered me into a chair opposite him, then left. Barty leaned over to shake my hand. He squeezed tight and gave me the stare.

'Like the Persian?' he said, gesturing to a sumptuous red and yellow patterned carpet beneath us.

'Really nice.'

'A present from the Prince.'

'Nazeem?'

'Not the little singer either, no: the Crown Prince.'

I shuffled in my chair, feeling tired from all the carrying. Barty eyed me. 'So, what can I do for you, John?'

'Well, Mister Diaz...'