
NICK HOLDSTOCK

And Then

ONCE UPON A TIME the universe began. There was nothing, and then something—energy, or maybe matter—and then there were pterodactyls and the diplodocus. Then there were the monkey men who saw the singing slab. Then there was an age of bronze, an age of iron, an age of silent dark. Then there were Crusades, and the wonder of Byzantium was pushed until it fell. Then there was the Renaissance, and then, after the Enlightenment, the dawn of capital. There were two world wars, and then a cold one, and then there were two people, a man and woman, who lived in Hyderabad, whose marriage was organized, and who then, for private reasons, made the great journey to Greater London, where they found refuge with an uncle who ran a paper shop. It was in the smaller of the two rooms above the shop that the man and woman made the child the man insisted be called Chandra, who, despite being second generation, never felt, as some put it, “caught between two worlds.” Her mother’s cooking and school lunches, the schoolchildren’s mouths and the language of home: none of these were contradictions. These things were of a single world that made sense even when boys hurled rocks at her mother as they freewheeled by. Some of them were excellent shots, and Chandra, only six weeks later, started her degree at Norwich. Three years passed, she graduated, and then she found a job she was good at. She rented a large room in a shared house with two cats, underfloor heating, and a front door with a small panel of stained glass whose main colors were green and red, and yes, when the sun picked its way through the clouds and branches, there *were* emeralds and rubies on the beige stair carpet. There were men, four, not at the same time, except for those two weeks when she hadn’t found a way to tell Sean, and all of this, the work, the men, the carpet jewels, her mother blind in her left eye, continued till, at twenty-five, she stood on the platform at High Brooms while a February wind pushed chocolate wrappers round. The train was late. Or not coming. And there was something wrong with Britain. The way that people drank. The things they talked about. Multicultural or not, none of it seemed right, at least not for her right now. And this was why Geoffrey Wade and Jenny Mason, directors of Wade &

Mason, Publishers (no poetry, plays, or short stories), received, in ten-point Times New Roman, a short letter informing them that she, Chandra Deepak, would be resigning because she was going to São Paulo to work with street children. And this was why there was a position that Claire could apply for.

“Matthew, can I borrow your stapler?”

“Yes, Claire. Absolutely.”

Once upon a time the earth was slowly forming. Dust and rock soon ceased their spinning. Then there was an atmosphere and self-replicating things. Then the pyramids were raised, and then America was found. Then there was Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and then Margaret Thatcher exclaimed, “We have become a grandmother.” And the first affair of Geoffrey Wade was massively, disastrously, a big balls-up, a *mess*. And this was not a great surprise, because cheating on one’s fiancée was, like tennis or mah-jongg, a pursuit that required practice. How could he, on his first attempt, have known to organize his schedule so as to allow plausible periods when he was not at work or home or out with friends? How could he have known to keep a rack of shirts in his office cupboard that he, or his PA, personally took to the cleaners and that were never, except once, by accident, brought anywhere near home? He could not have. The whole debacle with Simone was just one of those things. And this was why he did not feel too bad through the ensuing three weeks when it appeared that his marriage to Sylvia, if not quite *off*, was very far from on. But after tears and many flowers, the great train of their betrothal managed to reach the station. And Geoffrey knew he’d learnt his lesson. From then on, in spare moments, on the toilet, in the lift, he asked himself the simple question, *Are you being careful?* And the answer, after Simone, was almost always, *Yes*. There was only one *Perhaps* (Lesley, from publicity, who after very good sex liked to phone his wife and try to sell her things), and one definite *No*. In that instance he took immediate action. He asked Chandra to come into his office, and she did, looking meek and foxy, and he told her, without mucking about, that although it had been wonderful, it would have to end, because it wasn’t fair on her, his wife, or their darling three-month-old son. And she had laughed and said, “All right,” and he was so impressed by her depth of understanding that when he got her resignation he thought it would be nice if he could go into his private bathroom and cry several tears, if only as a kind of tribute to her strength of character, force of will, and very soft, brown feet. She was irreplaceable, but they would have to

try, and, as always, there were plenty of applications from people who were well qualified to the same dull degree. He, as director, should have taken a leading role in the process of recruitment. But the idea of Chandra's replacement was really too depressing, so he delegated the whole sad thing to Alasdair. And this was why underqualified Claire was called for an interview.

"Bradford. What about you?"

"Nowhere really."

"Really? Come on, Matthew, you have to be from *somewhere*."

"Fine! We moved to Chicago when I was six, and then to Singapore when I was twelve, and then back to England when I was sixteen."

"That sounds great, you know, to get to live in all those places."

"I don't know, Claire. Maybe."

Once upon a time, Qin Shi Huangdi, first emperor of China, had an unemployment problem. And so, to keep order, he decreed that a wall be built. And then, some years later, another wall was built in Berlin, and then Alasdair was told his mother had Alzheimer's. And the large room with the peach wallpaper was not big enough to hold his vast and doubled grief. It wasn't because they were close: she lived an hour's drive away, but they met only twice a month, and when they did it was always nice but never any more. The greater cause was the knowledge that something (in this instance, his mother) would soon be removed, something that had stood between him and the end of things. Because that was when he knew that he would really die. That was what he could not accept. That death, as horde or lone assassin, could invade at any time: next year, tomorrow, now. And he was being stupid, selfish. His mother was dying. It was happening all the time; even while he sat with her, held her hand, used words in a brittle way, her supply of brain cells was slowly running out. And everyone at work knew this, some directly but most not, and for the first few weeks they lapped him with waves of sympathy. A smile at the copier, a held-open door, a supposedly unwanted doughnut gifted to his desk. But they had their own healthy lives that just continued on. How can he, apropos of nothing, say that she no longer knows his name or that he is her son? He cannot, so the pain remains. If only one of them seemed as if he or she might ask. Then he would not feel so bad. And although Claire didn't ask either, and although he didn't tell, he felt that she one day might. And if she did, and if

he did, he knew from her eyes, her cheeks, that she would understand. And this was not the only reason he gave her the job.

“Claire, have you had lunch yet?”

“No, I’ve got to finish this.”

“No, you don’t. Look at the sky. It’s sunny. It’s almost warm. Let’s go sit in the gardens.”

“But I have to give this to Geoffrey.”

“Sure. But he’s gone to lunch with some woman, and, judging by the looks of her, there’s no way he’ll be back by four.”

“Very funny. He’s married.”

“So’s Elizabeth Taylor.”

“Look, Matthew, even if you’re right, it will still take me two hours to finish this.”

“And what’s the time? Quarter past one. You’ve got loads of time. So come on. There’ll be squirrels.”

Once upon a time Jesus Christ was born. He said something about love, and then the soul of man was saved. And then there was Auschwitz, and Matthew is not sure that he likes children’s books. There is something dishonest about them. With a normal book, for adults, the ideas can be ignored. But kids don’t really have a choice, they can’t help but absorb, except for when they’re wetting themselves or being really sick. No, the ideas in children’s books—the rapid, banal platitudes about stroking kittens and not stealing jam—just get sucked up by them, and that’s why kids are scary. They get force-fed propaganda they don’t know how to use. Maybe that’s why they have those stares, the ones that make him feel as if they see inside his head. When he joined the company, three years ago, they were only publishing several children’s titles a year. Now, after the success of *Paws*, almost half his job involves the bloody things. He cannot think of a way out; the tenth *Paws* book is due next month. But then Chandra does a bunk to South America. Which leaves fantasy in a mess, because Deena can’t delegate, and Alasdair is bloody useless, so when he says to Geoffrey, “Will you let me take it on?” it almost seems reasonable, except that fantasy sells half as much, which makes it a demotion, and why would anyone want a demotion? But he has dealt with Geoffrey’s wife when she’s been difficult. When she has said she does not believe that he is in a meeting. When she

has threatened to come in. On these occasions he has managed, by way of his nice vowels and hair, to calm and persuade her. And this is why Geoffrey nods. This is how Matthew ended up sitting next to Claire.

"But what else is there? Even if you don't believe in God, and I don't, what other kind of commitment can you make except for getting married? What else are you going to do? Get a mortgage together? Is that the best our secular but money-worshipping society can do? If it is, we're *fucked*."

"Wow, Matthew. No wonder you've been married twice."

"What, because I'm crazy?"

[she laughs] "No. Because you take it seriously."

"Well, I once saw this film with Donald Sutherland in which he played this really strange priest who delivers a wedding speech about how we shouldn't feel bad if our marriages don't work out, because getting married is just a way of trying our best. It's an optimistic gesture, and that's the main thing."

"OK, maybe you're not that serious about marriage."

"No, no, I am. Really."

"OK. What was the film called?"

"No idea. It was on TV one night. I was really drunk."

Once upon a time the Muslim armies conquered Persia. Then there was the Six-Day War, and Deena cannot believe that Matthew is in charge. Maybe he's charming, and maybe he's funny, and maybe he knows fuck-all about fantasy literature. The only book he's ever mentioned is *The Lord of the Rings*, and that was only after the shitty films came out. He has always, at parties and meetings, spoken of the genre with a lilt of condescension. She and Chandra built that section. They were the ones who sat and talked and read while the cleaners worked in the evenings. They were the ones who found the beyond-genre stuff. They published the Dark Sun series; they published *The Wild*. And maybe fantasy only sells a third of what those stupid dog books do. But the work is excellent; it will last. And Matthew will fuck it all up. In the last two weeks he's rejected three brilliant manuscripts. Deena does not hate Chandra, Deena is not angry. But the fact remains: all this is Chandra's fault. Matthew would have hesitated if she'd still been here. And so what if Claire is nice and friendly; she seems like the kind of creature that defers to men. Every time that Deena glances she and Matthew are leaning, talking. If only Jenny wasn't sick. If only she was here to keep an eye on Geoffrey and Matthew.

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“Yeah, I saw it last night. I thought it was really good.”

“What did you like best?”

“The horses, they were really funny. Maybe they were too rude sometimes, but I really believed in them. They said the kind of things I expect a flying horse with two heads to say.”

[he laughs] “Do you really have expectations about that kind of thing?”

[she also laughs] “Sort of. I mean, it all made sense. None of it sounded stupid. Except for maybe that stuff about the ring that remembers every finger it’s been on.”

“Oh, I liked that. Didn’t you think that was romantic?”

“No, it was silly.”

“OK, so what *do* you think is romantic? Candlelight? A string quartet? Mr. Darcy with red roses in a limousine?”

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“What about dinner in a small Italian restaurant that has good vegetarian options? Would that be romantic?”

“Yes.”

“And if you were eating with someone who really likes you? Would that be romantic?”

“Yes.”

“So if you were free, and that person asked you, would you meet him at Ulivo, on Stoke Newington Church Street, at eight thirty tonight?”

[she laughs] “Yes!”

“OK. Have a good evening.”

“I will.”

“Me too. See you then.”

Once upon a time the French lost at Agincourt, and then there was 9/11, and when Jenny’s in her corner office all the space feels wrong. Vertigo, but inverted: it is looking up she fears. The ceiling, and the floor above, and so on, to the roof. After that, just empty air and falling up so fast. Up to space where it is cold and she will suffocate. She first felt it two months ago, and at the time she had blamed the veal; it was that sort of disquiet, the sense of wrong increasing even though there wasn’t pain or any urge to vomit. That day she’d sat at her desk and talked into her phone to no one at all until it passed. The second time, three days after, she had to lie on the floor, facedown, counting, breathing, reciting in an inner voice the names of all

the books that Asimov had written, cowritten, or merely edited. And gravity is not some big machine that can just break down. She knows this. There is no chance of it failing, no chance of her being taken into vast and roaring nothing. She knows that her brain is wrong. She only feels this way when she is in her office. When she is outside, unprotected, everything unfolds as normal. The sky only evokes one feeling: a sense of limitless expansion.

“Hey.”

“Hey.”

“Are you OK?”

“Yeah. You?”

“Yeah.”

“You look really nice.”

“So do you.”

“What time is it?”

“About nine. Why? Do you have to be somewhere?”

“No.”

“Good. Because I think we should stay here all day. I mean, it looks horrible outside.”

“Yeah, I can see that.”

“And it’s not as if we’d be able to go for a long walk down the Embankment, and then have several bottles of wine. In this weather,” [his hand flicks the blind, and sharp sun enters] “it would be awful.”

“Awful.”

“Nasty.”

“Horrid.”

“I already said that.”

“No, you didn’t, you said ‘horrible.’”

“Close enough.”

“Let’s not talk anymore.”

“Agreed.”

“Fine.”

“Have you got any juice?”

“So now we’re talking?”

“Maybe.”

“All right. Orange or apple?”

"Apple."

"No."

"OK, orange."

"Nope."

[she laughs] "Are you always this funny in the morning?"

"*You're* laughing."

"It's not my fault. I'm just happy."

"Really? Me too. But seriously, I've got an umbrella. And I'm really hungry. There's a Polish bakery about twenty minutes from here. I could be back in half an hour."

"I'll come with you."

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah."

"Great, OK, let's go."

"What is it? Changed your mind?"

"No."

"Do you want me to dress you?"

"No."

"So what's the matter?"

"Sorry, I'm being really silly. I'm shy. I don't want you to see me."

"That's all right. I'll be in the lounge."

"Thanks. I'm sorry."

"It's OK. See you in a minute."

Once upon a time London had a plague, then a fire, and Sylvia, as Geoffrey's wife, knows where he puts his dick. There was his personal trainer, his accountant, then Chandra; heaven knows how many interns. And she makes a show of minding. There is the divorce to think of. But in actual fact, she's glad. Their marriage was a good trade (his money for her status), and there is always someone who wants to screw the posh wife of the boss. Alasdair, that mope, was fine; Chandra was a lovely girl with remarkable hands. Sylvia sucked Matthew once, and she wonders when he'll follow up because he was big. Probably not until he's finished with that silly new girl who has bad hair.

"Darling?"

"Yes, Matthew?"

"What do you want to do this weekend?"

"I don't mind."

"Do you want to go to the cinema? The new Terry Gilliam is out."

"OK, great."

"Or do you want to go to the V&A? Alasdair says there's a new John Tenniel exhibit?"

"That sounds lovely, let's go. We could have lunch at Artichoke."

"Or we could spend the weekend in a listed cottage. It has a log fire, views of woods and sheep, and it's called Little Midge."

"That sounds wonderful! Whose is it?"

"Gareth's. He was my best man."

"The first time?"

"That's right. So which one do you want to do?"

"All of them."

Once upon a time the ship *Titanic* sank. And then Geoffrey's doctor phones. Alasdair must see his mother; Jenny starts to leave the ground. Deena is killed by a tractor; Chandra is declared a saint. And Matthew, fucking Sylvia, feels sort of, kind of, *bad*.