

as rivers flow

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Also by John Saul in Salt Modern Fiction

Call It Tender

The Most Serene Republic: love stories from cities

john saul

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CAMBRIDGE

PUBLISHED BY SALT PUBLISHING
14a High Street, Fulbourn, Cambridge CB21 5DH United Kingdom

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First published 2009

Printed and bound in the United Kingdom by Biddles Ltd, King's Lynn, Norfolk

Typeset in Swift 11 / 14

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ISBN 978 1 84471 575 6 paperback

Salt Publishing Ltd gratefully acknowledges
the financial assistance of Arts Council England



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MERSEY

LET THOSE LIGHTS go on. Let: my favourite word from the beginning: let. It speaks authority. Let the party begin. Let the dust settle.

After seventy years it has. Here I am coming down Dale Street into Queensway, looking down the mouth of the old Mersey Tunnel. In 1934 the biggest road tunnel in the world. Who then said: Let the lights be switched on—? It was bearded King George V of England.

At the end of North John Street, notepad in hand, my future dad, tall, blue eyes, straw-coloured teeth, was standing listening. Simmering still from a row with his editor at the *Daily Post*. My mum with her mum. 200,000 people including entire schools who had trekked into town from all over, Allerton, Huyton, Toxteth, Bootle and Anfield, down Mount Pleasant and Scotland Road, in the heat that followed the cloudbursts in the night.

The union jacks waved, the green and gold curtains drew back, jerkily, pulled by strong arms because the gold switch pushed by the King failed to start the motors; the strong arms pulled their strongest because 200,000 people, a crowd rippling with the emotions of expectations, can't give up their day not to see a tunnel mouth. They have to be able to salute the engineering which drilled the two pilot bore-holes to within one inch of each other, which saw the roof defy the very Mersey by just four feet of rock. They must have their aspirations as humans reflected in the perfection of the broad bends of roadway, divinely lit;

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the sight of the tunnel mouth is their due as citizens, even if some, like my mum's mum, had been content enough to see Queen Mary's dress and hat, or stare at the raindrops on the teakwood and cream enamel of the royal train stopped in Lime Street.

My dad felt his own switch thrown. Glory be, someone in the crowd called when the tunnel mouth appeared in all its lights, green and gold and warm just as my mum's mum could have hoped for. The tiles were exactly the right cream. May, my grandmother said to my mother, remember that colour. That cream on the walls is just the colour I want for the living room. What? said May, who had just noticed my dad—not of course with a label stuck to his forehead saying dad, or husband—but getting purple over this shout of Glory be.

Are you all right? May said to him.

What?

That was his first word to my future mother. My mother. His greeting: What?

You look, well, you don't look ill exactly, but you're not enjoying yourself.

Enjoying myself?

He glared. Angry that this could be a possible description of his state. Enjoying yourself is what moon men might do. Rabbits. Girls with dolls' houses. Fred Astaire.

I've got trouble at work, he said. Now there'll be more.

Come on dear, said May's mother, we shall see better from up the steps. I want to see for myself if his trousers are creased at the sides, as they say, not at the front and the back.

Oh no, said May. Not these steps, my dress won't like it.

It could be your last chance, said my future dad prophetically. That man'll be dead in two years.

MERSEY

We must go down the tunnel soon, mother, said May. Father will take us. He said so. We didn't go to the peek previews and now we will be going in style.

Have you noted down the opening hours, dear? said my grandmother.

Just daylight hours—at first, my father informed them. The next thing we know there'll be operators at the booths at all hours, at Christmas even. But is my paper going to say that?

Paper? said my grandmother.

I work at the *Daily Post*.

Look, said May, he's giving those children medals.

They'll be commemorative, my grandmother commented. You won't be wanting one?

I'm 24 years old, mother.

Blushing, she looked at my father, who was scribbling hectically on his notepad. My mother watched but didn't want to interrupt. His absorption with his notebook, his blue eyes fixed there, let her do as she liked. She daydreamed. His hair was fair and neatly parted and wavy, like hair sometimes was in the cartoons. He wrote frantically no matter how jostled he was by the crowd, no matter how much she looked at him and loosed her guesses. What could he dance? Maybe he played tennis, cricket? Or maybe a newshawk had no spare time? He would definitely be too busy writing up events in London and America. About Bonny and Clyde (maybe he knows why the car they died in had a half-eaten sandwich and a saxophone inside?), about the revolution in Mexico. China. Oh what a whirlwind the world was in, what a giddy maelstrom. Look at all these people. Those people on the rooftop there. And there, clinging to the chimneys. What a calamity if they fell. And see that woman in the

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white suit with that priceless necktie, trying to be Marlene Dietrich.

My father was pushed up so close she could almost read his writing. He licked his pencil and flipped to a new page, all in a trice. She guessed he had one jacket and this was that jacket. Those wide lapels. She daydreamed he'd been admitted to her hospital. She tried to guess how he would behave if he was a patient sitting up looking at her with his blue eyes and wavy hair. She wondered if someone had invented a scale of dark hair and blondness and where exactly his fair hair would reach on the scale. Was blondness so special and what difference could it make? He dashed on to the next page. His pencil was a stub. What would take him to the hospital in the first place, would it be a wrist sprained from over-reporting?

Glory, he said in disgust—glory. Seventeen men died building this tunnel.

Are you speaking to me? said May.

He looked her way for the first time and immediately his expression changed. At her comely looks, said to resemble Gracie Fields, at her smile as it followed her frown.

I wasn't, he said with a stutter, but I suppose I am now.

So? she said provocatively. Seventeen men died, but you can't build a tunnel such as this, in which streams of wheeled traffic may run in light and safety—you heard the King, you wrote it down I expect.

Light and safety, yes, my father read. Below the depths and turbulence of tidal water bearing ships of the world. Many hundreds have toiled here, etcetera, etcetera, struggled—

For long months against mud and darkness to bring it into being.

Being, yes. May our peoples—

MERSEY

May, that's my name.

What?

It comes up sometimes, just like that.

I was going to say: how can you remember so much of his speech, you aren't writing it down like I am.

I just can.

She's always been particularly good at that, my grandmother leant across to add. Mind you, if you speak to people like he does, well, bless his great beard. But what is upsetting you so?

Well. Seventeen men died and what does our King George say about this? Nothing. It's a disgrace. Now I'm going back to the paper and I will say to my editor, we must print this. We should say: King George made no mention of the fact seventeen workers died.

What for?

What *for*?

Mother leave him alone. It's his work. I think it's right he should say this if it's true.

Of course it's true. Even King George knows it's true.

Then it is true, said my mother's mother.

I must get back to the office, my father said. Let—

Yes—

May, you have the poor man stuck for words. And a new-shawk. It's your hat.

This old hat?

Well all right. It's your dress.

It's only an afternoon dress, mother.

It was one of the best at Marshall and Snelgrove's.

It was not. We found this at Broadbent's.

Look now, May, they're driving through the arch with those ocean liners in stone above them. I do believe he's going to Birkenhead.

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I was going to say, said my father, perhaps we could meet for a cup of tea in an hour or so? I know a fine place just by the Tatler.

Tatler?

That new news theatre. It'll be jam packed of course. All these people looking for somewhere to go, out of the sizzling sun.

Well, said my grandmother. I'm going to surprise you. I'm going to leave you here, May, I'm going to go down to the tunnel and look at those lights. Your father will have listened to His Majesty on the radio and he will want to know so many details.

This thoroughfare is great and strange, said May repeating the words of the King. The wonder of your tunnel will only come into mind after reflection.

It will dear. I want to look more closely at those cream tiles. Those lights are beautiful.

They're embedded, said my father.

Embedded? said my mother reddening.

That's why they look so fine. And they are lit by two separate power stations, alternately. One light is lit by one station, the next by the other station, the next by the first station and so on. When there's a power cut half the lights will stay on.

That's so clever. Isn't that clever, mother? Mother?

She's gone.

She would have crossed the bottom of Dale Street, moving down the crowd towards the toll booths.

Mother? called May on tiptoe.

She can't hear. Why not just let her go.

It feels strange, said May. Like everything has stopped for a moment. Even the Mersey.

It hasn't, my dad contradicted. The river flows always.

MERSEY

What?

Let him say this to her. Let her let him say this.

ELBE

TWO BLACK TUGS begin turning a container vessel in the grey waters of the Elbe. This is the *Hanjin Taipei*, broader and longer than the *Titanic*. The white letters of HANJIN, thirty feet tall, the tail of the J dropping below the others, stand confidently on its black-painted side. Its containers, in workmanlike blue, dark green and rust likewise carry the company name and its circular yin-yang logo.

Walking her hunched-shouldered walk down the office corridor Victoria sees the black hull filling the end-window, cutting out the sky and dimming the daylight as the *Taipei* moves across. Nonetheless she walks straight to her office. To the piles of papers and the computer screen, the BlackBerry lying on a table next to her mobile phone. All of which she uncharacteristically ignores. From her own window, the black wall of steel has become more recognisably a ship arriving on the tide. The moment she goes to the window a cable to the tug below, the *Accurat*, draws taut. A second tug busies itself into position at the heel of the giant, readying itself to turn the *Hanjin Taipei* in a circle.

Dear Victoria, she reads again in the note Paul sent. On or around the 24th—we always say on or around—we should arrive in your town although we will dock for a few hours only. Why not meet me? Call the Schiffsmeldedienst in Finkenwerder (www.smd.de). They will be able to say exactly when we come in. Then give me a call. I have something for you from Los Angeles and you can bring me one of those boxes of marzipan. If you want. It would be lovely just to see you after all these years.

Bemused that for the second time that day she should

ELBE

stop and watch a ship instead of dealing with urgent decisions, Victoria stays by the window. Sniffing, feeling a cold or worse coming on, she looks across the river at the blue peachy light, a yellow haze behind the container port and above the horizon, the Harburg hills, behind everything like a wash. Down the river, to her right, clouds in a line over the far bank stretch into the distance, over the terminals and the oil storage tanks, to where the whole sky is dark and the last cranes mere silhouettes in the darkness. Below her, pitching and striving, a flat blue *barkasse* barge scurries to avoid the great bows before they squeeze out the space for its passage.

From the pontoon restaurant Deborah and Merryweather —that surname he always got called by—watched the Hanjin container ship pass under a darkening sky on its way up the Elbe. They kept watching until it was behind her and only he had it in sight. All that expansive water, began Deborah pretending to shiver with fear at the thought. Expensive water? said Merryweather. *Expansive*, said Deborah; that water is so close it could swallow us any moment. But we're floating, said Merryweather. How true, replied Deborah, like jellyfish. Logs, said Merryweather looking past her shoulder. She glanced round to see what he was looking at. The receding ship was slowly changing shape to start turning broadside on. Do you remember that song, 'Little Boxes', when we were students? he asked her (they were trying hard to reconnect after years in different places). Deborah, having filled the seat beside her with her coat, bags, phone, beret, camera and pocket dictionary, was looking with delight at her fish soup which had come in a glass jar with a clasp. This is exotic, a *compote* jar, she said, is that the word? Well actually I was talking about *boxes*,

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said Merryweather, not jars, and those containers are *big boxes*. I suppose so, said Deborah, just look at that yellow thing, is it a pepper? Ooh, and that's a *tomato*. I'm going to *photograph* this. Did you hear what I said? said Merryweather. I did, said Deborah, but you seem to be taking a long time to get to the point; are you going to make a hit record with a song called 'Big Boxes', are you going to go straight to the studio or what? Well no, said Merryweather, what do you mean, *studio*? I don't know, said Deborah, you called me up out of the blue because you had this meeting here and you knew I was passing through, how in God's—how did you know I was even here, have you got spies out because if you have you'd better recall them quick, and oh dear now I've flustered you, I should have just asked you questions outright and what do I do, I fluster people, I don't mean to create harm, havoc. But sometimes people just get tangled in my propeller. That was rather a clever thing to say, don't you think, Merry, given that we were talking about ships? Deborah, said Merryweather, please relax; I was just drawing your attention to the fact that that ship out there was full of big boxes and nowadays everything is in packages and that's all we care about. This soup isn't a package, Deborah objected. You know what I mean. I don't, said Deborah; all *who* cares about? *Alles in Ordnung*? asked the waiter. Ya, yes, *Danke*, said Merryweather. *Ja*, said Deborah looking down at and then up from her dictionary. She smiled hugely at the waiter, as if he had handed her the very present she wanted for her birthday. *Meiner Herr, die Suppe ist köstlich*. Wait wait, Deborah said to him, because I *do* like these yellow tulips you've put on the table. *Und die Tulpen sind—fabelhaft*. The waiter returned the compliments by raising his eyebrows but in a way that was approving. And I see you, *der Herr*, the waiter said, are pointing to the

ship just now, well any moment there will come a few waves, yes. Rolling. Just a little. A few. There, you see. I see, whoa, said Merryweather swaying at the table, exaggerating the pontoon's movement. There it is still, he said. Where's what still? said Deborah. That ship, it looks like it's turning round. Turning round? said Deborah, why?

The little *barkasse* hoots to the *Accurat* as it edges by. Every ten years (she has been here twenty) a *barkasse* has a collision and sinks. With her eyes fixed on the great ship, Victoria stretches both arms towards the ceiling; pushes up one arm, then the other, so her shoulders feel the exercise. She does this ten times. The *Hanjin Taipei* turns and turns. Its length shortens and its great body begins to taper. The bows grow as they move closer to the office building. In a scrape with this steel colossus, thinks Victoria, these walls would crumble like old cake. But such manoeuvres are routine. The *QE2* regularly passes this way, and any day now there'll be the *Queen Victoria*. *Victoria*: in his next note Paul would be sure to mention the new Queen ship. But there was no way she was going to the terminal to meet him, any more than she had gone to the dozens of rendezvous he had suggested over the years. She wondered if she should have his notes sent back to him, have his hopes of meeting her become more realistic, destroy these hopes altogether.

Anything could be in those boxes, said Merryweather trying a spoonful of Deborah's soup. Looking up, he was distracted by a message ticking across a screen above the restaurant counter. Deborah turned round to see what he saw. I can't decipher that, can you? Something about ships, said Merryweather. You were saying, said Deborah. I was saying anything could be in those boxes; it's all hidden nowadays;

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everything undesirable is hidden. Do you think I'm undesirable? said Deborah suddenly. I—erm, later, said Merryweather blushing, right now I mean things like pollution, the sorts of things your half-sister's organisation deals with. I don't say 'half-sister', Deborah corrected, I say sister. Sister, said Merryweather, now let me finish my point—you don't see CO₂. You can't recognise a terrorist by looking. I know, said Deborah, like genetic engineering; this fish could have been genetically engineered and I wouldn't taste it. Are you sure about that? said Merryweather. Not sure, no, said Deborah standing and holding her camera over the soup; so what is in boxes like that, bananas, computers? Anything, said Merryweather: tractors, stowaways, households. A flash lit the restaurant as Deborah clicked the shutter. What do you mean, households?

The cables are on, we're turning. I have nothing to do except hope Victoria makes it to the ship. No tasks. I can be on the bridge and look through the binoculars from up high. There are the churches, there the almost interminable dockland. Hills and woods to the south. Astonishing how many people I see are watching us. Along the banks, in the windows of houses and restaurants and offices. They see we are somehow mighty but don't know what to make of us. Don't know where we have been or what it's like for us. They see us arriving and leaving, entering estuaries, riding above fields of cows; they don't stop to think that we spend almost every minute on the vast sea, alone but for the occasional ship, although this time Mr Johnson did spy a whale. Otherwise it's the same, the same creaking and vibrations and weathers. The ripples that run through the frame of the ship, up its length and back again. Always the sea. Day and night, sea, sleep and

food. Stay in as much as you can to keep out of the wind. Keep away from where you might inhale smoke, or soot worst of all. Fill the ship's pool. See the decks are cleaned on fine days if at all. Only when land nears, turn your mind to the port to come. The fields, cranes, the spires and towers, the mountains or the hills. Like here, the Harburg hills.

The *Hanjin* giant is turning faster, showing its bulb bow. Victoria lets the desk phone ring. Lets the papers on the table keep their secrets longer. She closes down the computer and returns to the window. Across the river a group of people on a passenger liner in dry dock has gathered at a rail to watch. Victoria wonders how many people still realise that very dock was where the keel was laid to the battleship *Bismarck*, seventy years before. She hadn't known until Paul mentioned it in his letter: the *Bismarck*, then the most heavily armed warship afloat, had left those docks for trials, then sailed back up the Elbe for final touches to be made. A flat floating arsenal, huge and mighty but not even half the tonnage of the *Hanjin Taipei*. Tugs would have turned the *Bismarck* right here, just like this. Five years to build and just nine days at war, before being battered and torpedoed to the bottom of the Atlantic.

So come on Merry, said Deborah looking straight at him as she shook the wrong end of the salt cellar, tell me exactly what you're doing. I'm still in advertising, he said watching the salt fly. Advertising what? All kinds of things, it hardly matters what; what I do is more about finding an approach, a slogan. So how would you advertise me, said Deborah. I—well you'd have to tell me about *yourself*. Me, hm, well, myself. I've some experience behind me, *too* much you

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could argue, too much to easily make one of those *profiles* people like, is that something that you do too? What are you saying? asked Merryweather tussling with the bones of his *Scholle*, what experience exactly? What do I mean? said Deborah indignantly, what do you mean, do you mean of men, are you trying to tie me up with men somehow? I didn't mean that, no, it was an open-ended question you might say. Merry, do you know how many men I've slept with? Twelve. Now that is enough *experience*. I knew a man once who said that was all he wanted to know, *how many*, can you imagine? Talk about quantity over quality. You know what I said to him? I said, "Is that 'how many' including you?", teasing him I suppose, because we hadn't, well, you know, hadn't. He couldn't answer my question so did I answer his? I didn't. I *pretended* to, just to see what would happen. I came out with some stupid number, like 'two'. He shut up, I shut up. He went his way, I went mine. Isn't that a line from a song, a jingle?

Stowaways, if there are any, often try the lifeboat at the stern. We find them, the port security doesn't. I'm not a fan of port precautions. Who likes gates and red tape? But Victoria will have to talk her way past the main booth if she is to visit. And someone will have to help her find her way across the maze of carriers and grabbers. Last week in Korea an engineer went down the gangway, looked left and was crushed by a van carrier coming from the right. Port time is only eight hours. Then back on the pendulum route as they call it, to Los Angeles. I told Mr Johnson she was coming. I didn't say she might not come at all. He cleared her visit insofar as he could. The crew won't like it, but they're changing anyway. Even if they see her, most of them aren't down for the return trip. There's such flux these days.

Troubled, Victoria puts her finger on what disturbs her. It's the fact she was looking out of the window at all. She never used to. She always got down to her work, listened, assimilated everything, argued, judged, decided. The organisation then worked as smoothly as it could. Now she was looking out of the window at a boat made in China, stacked with containers made in China, containers containing goods made in China.

One telephone stops, the other starts. Could be the same person. Waves from the turntabling manoeuvre slap at the quayside below. The second phone stops.

Three days with Paul had been delightful and that was all. *Did you love me for ever, just for those three days?* Paul wrote once. She thought that was clever until he revealed he was quoting from a song. Lucinda Williams, his sun in the sky. But had he come to grips with how she Victoria was? Her plans did not include lifelong love. There was no reason for them to match the way Paul would have liked. Once she realised that, she stopped replying to his notes; the notes he went on writing, like a bird singing for a mate not knowing all its kind are now extinct. She was trying to help him by not replying. She hears someone behind her. Her assistant has entered without knocking. The environment minister is on the line, Pirke says. The *minister*? Minister, says Pirke. Of course, says Victoria. Pirke hands her a mobile phone. She finds herself talking to him smoothly. Concentrating on his words. Agreeing about the draft they've both seen. Saying she stands by everything, yes, that's good of course. Yes. Carefully letting him close the conversation his way.

The ship is broadening across, approaching the point when its bow will be full on, the recesses of its anchors