

Patrick Chapman

Juniper Bing

Frost cracked on the street outside like a *crème brûlée* gone wrong. The forecast was for a sub-zero night, the kind of weather that defeated armies. Jeffrey Bing did not want to leave his warm office but he had made an appointment.

In the lift to the foyer, he caught sight of a particularly ugly guy. Here was a fat loser in a pea coat and a tartan scarf over a Louis Copeland suit. A morlock dressed as a wobble. Jeffrey blinked at his own reflection and looked away. He watched the numbers light up in sequence until the doors parted and he stepped out. There was no concierge. The consulting firm Jeffrey worked for had signed the lease in anticipation of a new city quarter that was no longer expected. From his sixteenth-floor cubicle, the view was of this building's stillborn twin. He liked the austere beauty of that skeletal tower, its floors but no walls giving it the aspect of something unearthed.

Jeffrey shivered as he left the building. He had taken the lift because there would be enough stairs later. He knew he was not classically fit. Too lumpy, he over-existed. Smoking did not help him lose weight, though it had given him the chest complaint that now sawed away at his innards.

The previous morning he had felt a little weaker in the abdomen than usual and he made an appointment to visit Doctor Stone, who would not be surprised to see him, for Jeffrey was always popping around. Stone was himself a man of considerable girth, and appeared to have both a scalpel intellect and a blunt manner. That could be tricky. The doctor didn't do denial. He was a denial denier. Whenever Jeffrey grumbled up to his clinic, Stone would trot out the customary advice to shed a few kilos but he seemed disinclined to lead by example.

Jeffrey got a tram to Mayor Street and crunched down to the clinic. There were no other patients waiting and the receptionist told him to take a seat. After ten minutes, the doctor popped his head out.

‘Bing.’

Jeffrey put down the copy of *Irish Tatler* in which he had been browsing the social pictures at the back. It was in this column, many years before, that he had first seen Juniper. Now he looked for her there. These days it was the only place he was likely to find her.

He got up and followed the doctor.

In the surgery, Stone smiled and shook his patient’s hand. ‘Take off your coat and sit down. There’s a good fellow.’

Without speaking, Jeffrey did as he was told.

Doctor Stone sat and called up Jeffrey’s record on the computer, studied it for a minute, then turned to him. ‘Now what can we do for you?’

‘Chest infection, I think.’ Jeffrey was surprised to hear that his voice sounded like that of a well man. His throat felt as though he had swallowed a very small jellyfish that refused to go down.

Doctor Stone looked smug. He rubbed his hands together and stood up.

‘Get up on there for me,’ he indicated the exam table.

Jeffrey did as he was told.

The doctor checked his pulse and shone a light down his throat, then into his ears, and listened to his breathing with a stethoscope. This routine made Jeffrey feel properly inspected. He’d had to pull his shirt up and the doctor had seen his stomach, its furry corrugations.

‘Chest infection,’ the doctor said, and sat at his computer again while Jeffrey got off the table and tucked his shirt into his trousers.

The patient was relieved that there was actually something wrong with him.

‘Plus,’ the doctor continued, ‘you’re unfit. Otherwise, everything is fine. All the signs point to stress, except the chest infection, which points to cigarettes. You can sit down again.’

A cold mass settled inside Jeffrey as he sat.

Doctor Stone made out a prescription for antibiotics and cortisone. He wrote a request for blood tests. ‘Tell me this. Do you ever intend to have children?’

‘No.’ This approach was new.

‘Are you going out with anyone?’

‘Not that I’m aware of.’

‘Be serious. You might want to have children one day, right?’

‘No.’

‘Work with me here. What age are you now? Forty?’

‘Thirty-four.’

‘Right. So let me tell you this. Say you do have kids, if you don’t give up the fags you won’t be around to see them grow up.’

Jeffrey deflated a little. Was that another smug look on the doctor’s face or still the same one?

‘How much would you go through in a day?’

‘Twenty, max.’ Jeffrey fidgeted.

‘Well, as I said...’

‘I should be around for my children.’

‘No. They should be around for you.’

‘Excuse me?’

Doctor Stone leaned forward an inch. ‘Let me put a little scenario to you. You’ll meet some lovely woman and you’ll have kids. Then you’ll work your considerable butt off to provide a home and education for the little rug-rats, so you’ll

never see them as they're growing up. But then when they're finished school and you're retired, then will you get to see them? I don't think so. When you should be able to enjoy the company of your children, you'll be only a photo on the wall. "Why is Daddy a Polaroid, Mammy?" they will ask.

'And here's the kicker. Here comes the bad news. Say your wife is still a relatively young woman, still relatively attractive, right? Now, to coin a phrase, it's a truth universally acknowledged that a youngish, good-looking woman in possession of a small fortune in life assurance must be in want of a husband. So what's to stop some Johnny-come-lately moving in and taking over everything you've built up? You see what I'm saying here? Your wife won't be sentimental about it, believe me. She'll soon be sleeping with some randomer in your bed as if you had never existed. He'll get the benefit of everything you sacrificed for the sake of your family. And all because you didn't give up smoking now.' Doctor Stone sat back again and folded his arms like a genie.

'Christ.'

'No, think about it. Sure, she'll look back on you fondly but you'll be dead. It's up to you. If you don't mind having a short life, go ahead and smoke. But if you do, give up now.'

'I...will.'

'That said, I suggest you don't give up until you really want to.'

'But - '

'You have to want to, and when you're ready, here's a little plan to stick to.' Doctor Stone clapped his hands together. 'Make a list of the reasons you're giving it up. Lung cancer. Chest infections. Poor circulation in the wedding tackle. Take out that list every time you feel like a smoke. Save up the money you'd be spending on the fags for six months, as a little incentive. Tenner a day? After half a year, when your physical addiction is gone, you'll have a nice tidy sum. Take that money and blow it on something for yourself. A new sound system. A weekend in Paris. An hour with a very good hooker. Something fun. You have to treat yourself.'

'I thought that's why I was paying you.'

The doctor didn't hear him. He was concentrating on his spiel. 'Then you can enjoy being more than a sperm donor, and a lump sum when you're dead.'

'What else is there?'

Doctor Stone smirked. 'You've got me, there.'

Jeffrey coughed and tasted blood.

The doctor watched him with mild interest as the rattle died down. He seemed to be waiting for a decision from his patient.

Jeffrey sighed, straightened in his seat and pulled on the lapels of his jacket. 'Look here, doctor. None of what you say is relevant to me. There was someone once but only that one. No one has touched me since, not intimately, which is just as well. Women find me revolting, and they're right. Men too. So I'm sorry but the scenario you paint is one I have no real interest in pursuing.'

Jeffrey smiled uncertainly. Tears formed, uncalled-for, in his eyes.

'Jesus, man.' Doctor Stone put out a hand and almost took Jeffrey's but hesitated then withdrew. He picked up the prescription and the request form and gave them to the patient, who took the paperwork and folded it into his pocket. They both stood up at once, moved by the same weary spirit.

'Call me in a week or two after you get those tests done.' The doctor said. 'In the meantime, get some exercise and put some bloody elbow grease into it. Man up and lose the flab.'

Jeffrey felt a new stillness. 'There's something else. I think I want to talk to you about something else. I just mentioned there was someone, once.'

Doctor Stone frowned. 'Sorry, Jeff, but you'll have to make another appointment.'

'But I really need to -'

'Ask the girl on the desk, there's a good man.'

Jeffrey nodded slowly then turned for the door and the doctor stepped in front of him to hold it open. Stone held his other hand out to shake but Jeffrey didn't take it.

Outside, the pharmacy next door to the clinic had just closed. He stood in its doorway to light a smoke, so that the wind would not thwart him, then he walked off slowly, determined to enjoy this final cigarette.

The chill in the air made his bones feel exposed like a sculpture made of X-rays.

At the tram stop a young couple, wrapped in fleeces, generated an aura of being newly in love. They held hands and played casually with each other's gloved fingers. Jeffrey regarded them with pity. One day, my friends, all this will not be yours.

He got the LUAS to Spencer Dock and crossed the road. A slice of light, his office floated above in the dark. He strode past it and over to the aborted apartment building. There he found a gap in the perimeter fence that he had made two nights previously, when he'd broken in to have a look around. He pulled it wide and squeezed in. Despite the state of his chest, he ran wheezing to the door that he knew would give. Now he started up the service stairwell, huffing all the way, one step after another.

Three times on his climb, he stopped for a breather, the air becoming icy in his lungs. It took him ten minutes to reach the sixteenth level, where he wandered out into the frost-covered concrete floor of what would have been a master bedroom. There was fluid in his throat now and a rising pain in his arm. The wind slapped his face and he surrendered to the assault so that he no longer felt it. The exertion of his climb had dulled his perception. This room had the city for walls but he barely saw it.

Jeffrey undid the buttons on his pea coat and shucked it off. That felt better. He dropped his tartan scarf. At the edge of the concrete floor he stopped. Jeffrey looked over at his office and concentrated his vision but could see no one there.

After shaking off one shoe then the other, he bent and rolled his socks down and tucked them into the shoes and god, how the cold stabbed up his bare feet into his shins, how his body hollowed itself out.

The doctor had said to sit so Jeffrey did as he was told. He sleepwalked back into the almost-room and sat down in the centre of it. His suit felt too thin against the icy air.

He could not feel his fingers any more. Nor could he now feel his lips, one lifting from the other, even as a word, a weightless word released at last, evaporated through them. 'Juniper.' The name hushed into the gloom of this darkening city.

The sounds of night itself were becoming faint now. The sirens and bells faded, the shrieking of gulls flying level with him grew distant, and the jagged music of the city softened into one brittle note that played out on the air and was gone.