

Philip Bowne

Lake Luzern

We hadn't seen each other in ten months.

The last time we spoke, about a week before I left, she promised a year's worth of kisses when I arrived. I was on the way into Luzern to meet her – sitting on the train with my travelling bag crammed between my knees. I pictured her hopping about with excitement and a pocketful of *Chocolat Villars*, just waiting for me to step onto the platform.

I was stuck living in Bristol, plodding through my final year of study, and she was in Luzern, working at a recycling factory just outside of Zurich. She was responsible for picking plastic, metal and paper, separating it all – saving the world.

“Recycling one tin can produces enough energy to listen to a whole album,” she said, out on the shore of Lake Luzern, one evening last summer. “Think of how many tin cans *one* person uses a year. If everyone recycled their cans, think how much we would reduce the carbon footprint.” Eva believed the solution to all the world's problems could be found in tin cans and compost heaps.

I wanted to spend the summer talking about how much our sex had improved, or tell her the story about my lecturer who dropped dead at the photocopier. But it never happened. It was all electric bicycles and offshore wind farms; reduce, reuse, recycle.

“I know how to significantly reduce the carbon footprint,” I said, stretching an arm around her square shoulders, leaning in until our noses touched. “Carbon tip-toe.”

She pushed me off.

“You're an idiot, JJ.”

Despite that, Eva wanted to travel around Europe with me, see it all. Leave from Luzern in June, and whip down through Italy and the Amalfi coast, across to Croatia and sail along the Dalmatian, to travel a loop around Europe.

But when the carriage doors opened, no Eva.

“I sent an e-mail,” she said on the phone.

“What e-mail?” I said, outside the train station in Luzern, bagged down with my new rucksack – pots and pans jangling from the back. I looked like a one-man band.

“It's been 10 months, Jonny. I feel like I've been in a relationship with my iPhone. We knew the distance would be difficult.”

A conveyor belt rumbled. I could picture her still leafing through the rubbish as she jammed the phone between her ear and shoulder.

“You could have fucking mentioned it, Eva,” I said. “Maybe before I bought a month-long train ticket.”

She didn't say anything.

“And you've bought your ticket, too.”

“I didn't buy a ticket, Jonny. It says it all in the e-mail.”

I could hear the sound of tin cans crumpling beneath the weight of an industrial crusher.

“I'm sorry,” she continued, shouting over the machinery. “Check your inbox. Maybe the e-mail was accidentally directed to your spam.”

Tin cans crushed and baled.

“Can I stay the night? Seeing as I'm here.”

She had already hung up.

#

I was crying. I walked along the waterside and watched the water slop against the concrete shore of Lake Luzern. Mount Pilatus towered over the city from the distance, collecting the only clouds in the clear sky around its summit. Sailboats bobbed out in the open water, their mainsails reaching up into a point from the boom. From a distance, they looked like fins of giant sharks lurking below the surface. There were other

boats too, some tied in at the lakeside, and one rowing boat, *Julia*, letters fading on the starboard. She was rotten through to her hull.

I found a pub on the waterfront, just along from the rowing boats. The sign was green and white – *The Shamrock*. I walked in and heads turned to inspect me. *The Undertones* blared out from a plastic jukebox in the far corner; *Teenage Kicks*. Four leaf clovers plastered the brown walls, muscling for attention over the white, green and orange flags. You could travel the world over and still wind up in an Irish bar.

The locals stared. I was the tourist, eyes glazed with tears. They were all sitting on stools around the bar, ladies swirling red wine in bowl-sized glasses, men with *Guinness*.

A fat man pulled out an empty stool for me. I threw my rucksack down and took a seat next to him. Shirt sleeves rolled up, his forearms boasted a healthy splattering of mud.

“Christoph,” he said, stretching out a large, worn hand. As he spoke I watched his chin move. It was dotted with prickly hairs, like a raspberry.

“John.”

He had the sort of handshake that made everything seem fine. Christoph nodded to the barman and a *Guinness* appeared. It didn't appear there was a choice.

“What brings you to Luzern, John?” A half-crescent of froth lined his top lip. The foam gushed to the bottom of my pint in an avalanche, settled, turned black.

I glugged down half of it and placed the glass back down on the bar.

“My girlfriend. I came here to meet her, to travel for the month.” I sunk the remainder of my drink.

“Oh, super! And she is coming?” Christoph swiped the cream from his upper lip.

“She doesn't want to see me.” I could feel the foam bubbling up at the back of my throat.

“So you don't travel?”

“She changed her mind. I'll go back to England tomorrow.”

The barman placed a full pint at my fingertips.

“You can go alone, no?” Christoph patted me hard on the back with his big hand.

“It's a bad start, getting dumped on day one.”

Christoph said, "Then it can only be better," laughing from his belly. His gut was pregnant; swollen into a perfect globe. I could imagine peeling up his shirt and finding it decorated with a map of the world. "Why go home now?"

#

I spent the evening at the pub with Christoph and his wife, Diana. They told me about their farm, high on the hillside on the way out to Pilatus, about how their children all left Luzern, about their cows and sheep. We played darts and Christoph spoke of his passion for *Guinness*.

"I could have it with my breakfast cereal," he said. "If she would let me." He nudged Diana. She was markedly slim in comparison to her husband, but didn't seem to mind his figure. Long blonde hair fell over her shoulder, fading grey, but she was still young in the face. In her day, she was probably the most beautiful girl in the town.

The bell jangled for last orders.

"Come and stay," Christoph said, placing his hand on my arm. "Help me on the farm tomorrow. Stay as long as you like. Share our bread."

"I would," I said, "But I've booked the night at a hotel." I hadn't.

"Oh." Christoph's face dropped.

"Tomorrow?" Diana said. She didn't say much.

Christoph cheered. "Yes! I'll meet you here, at eight thirty."

"In the morning?" I asked.

"Of course in the morning," Christoph said.

I worried what they wanted me for.

#

I left *The Shamrock* and walked out along the docks. Caught between the mountains and the city, I stopped. I don't know why I didn't go with Christoph that evening. Part of me was scared that he would persuade me to

travel alone. I stood by the lakeside, looking at the view I'd shared with Eva the summer before. The moon was full; a silver medal suspended in the sky, beyond the reach of even Pilatus and Rigi. I looked out, head spinning and eyelids fleshy, heavy, wanting to close. The street lights cast long flames on the surface water, and the white gable houses lit up the waterside like a furnace.

The rowing boat, *Julia*, was still tied up to a horn cleat. It could have been there for years, untouched. Parts of the rib had cracked away, and rust had grown thick over the rowlocks. Chucking my bag in first, I made camp for the night on the bottom boards.

I laid down on my back. I could hear fish making knife-breaks in the cool water, in lullaby. If Eva was there she would have pressed her icy fingertips into my armpit for warmth. I wasn't cold. The sun had only been down a few hours.

Beyond the bare mast of the boat, the distant silhouette of Mount. Pilatus kissed the stars in the blackness.

#

I woke up with wet feet. I didn't realise there was a long, thin crack in one of the bottom boards, allowing water to dribble into the hull. I got out and sat down at the waterside, watching the sun climb to the summit of Rigi. The outline of the mountains glowed like gold veins pumping through the skyline.

Christoph came early. I was thankful. I needed a meal and shower. He drove us up to his farm, half an hour south from the city near to Alpnach, at the foot of Pilatus. The car rumbled through the hillside. Swiss pines lined the roadside in regiment, upright, like soldiers.

"You look tired, John," Christoph said. "Did you party all night?"

"Hotel wasn't much good," I said. "Damp."

"You can sleep for an hour. But my cow, she will give birth this afternoon. I want you to be there."

I'd never seen anything give birth before.

#

We arrived after half an hour. Their house, a chalet with a gabled roof and wide eaves, looked out over the lake. Christoph ran out to check on his heifer.

Diana showed me to their spare bedroom. She was wearing a mucky jumper, a cream knit with chocolate icing smeared on her breast. As I showered I could smell cakes baking. When I went back into the

bedroom, Diana was cranking the Venetian blinds, locking out all light. I laid down on the bed, and fell asleep within minutes.

#

An hour later, I woke up with Christoph shaking me.

“It's time,” he said. “She's almost ready.”

I had no idea what he was talking about.

“Come on. You can't miss it.” He handed me a small plate with a thick slice of double-layered chocolate cake, and a glass of milk. “I'll be in the barn.”

I stuffed the cake into my mouth, swilling the chocolate pieces around with the creamy milk. I walked through a corridor lined with old family photos. Christoph hadn't always been so fat. One picture showed him and Diana with their two boys out by the lake. Christoph's shoulders were twice as broad as his hips, his stomach flat, legs thick and brown and barbed with hair. He stood proud in swim briefs. Diana was covered up; hat, sunglasses, skirt and blouse.

I went out to the barn. The cow was sectioned off in a pen, standing up, but covered in mud and dust and straw. Two hooves were emerging from her vagina, and a thick string of mucus dangled from her vulva.

I'd never seen a cow's vagina. It bagged up, crinkled; ready to shit out a new life. It was one of the most hideous things I've ever seen.

“Isn't it beautiful?” Christoph whispered.

I smiled.

“You might have to help me ease her out,” Christoph said, examining her backside. “If she struggles, we pull the calf from the hooves.”

“I can't do that,” I said. I didn't think I was scared of animals. But there's something alien about livestock – you only ever see them on TV or in children's books or in your dinner.

“Sure you can,” he said. “You can't be so negative, John. She will know.”

The cow mooed, mocking my city-boy insecurities.

“So what do we do now?” I asked.

“We wait for her. She won't be long.” Christoph moved to the corner of the barn and showed me a large black tub full of what looked like rotten grass. “This is silage. A cow's dinner. How does it smell, to you?”

“Rural,” I said, and took a seat on a small wooden stool, behind the cow. Christoph laughed, and joined me.

“A few years ago, we had a terrible time with the cows,” he said. “Everything was normal, the calves were coming strong, we were doing so well. I was even going to build a second barn. But one day they just started disappearing. One here, one there. We didn't know what was going on.”

I picked up some straw, ripped it up, sprinkled it to the floor.

“I searched for hours, Diana too. We lost ten in one week. We thought someone was stealing them.”

“Who was it?”

The cow shuffled her hind legs, grunting.

“It wasn't anyone,” he said. “They were committing suicide.”

I laughed. The cow's ears flopped down over her head. There was something deliberate about her posture. Her front legs were slightly cocked, like the hands of a magazine model posing nude.

“I'm not joking. They were jumping off the cliff, just down from here. I didn't understand. I found them finally, as I walked along the cliff's edge. I looked down and there they were, piled up in the valley. They'd all jumped off at the same spot.”

“Cows can't jump,” I said. “It must have been an accident. They must have strayed too far.”

“Once is an accident,” he said. “There were twelve cows down there.” He looked troubled by the memory.

I said, “Animals aren't capable of suicide.” I thought how common a sight it is to see cows out grazing on the green plateaus in the Alps. They don't just fall off cliff edges. Not that many.

“It must have been something I had done. They felt like slaves or prisoners or something, having me lock them up in a cowshed. They hated me. They would rather throw themselves off a cliff than be around me any longer.”

“I'm sure that's not the case,” I said. “Cows can't hate.”

“You don't know much about cows, John.”

I shrugged. "So did you fence in the suicide spot?"

"No, no. I thought about it," he said. "But then I thought if they want to die, they'll find a way."

I couldn't think of any other way a cow could kill itself.

"So I started sleeping out here with them, and eating my dinner with them, to show them I was a friend. One of them."

"What did Diana think?"

"She wasn't happy. I thought we might be divorced. She said I had lost my mind, I was paranoid, obsessed."

"So what happened?"

Christoph spread his palm in front of him and thumbed the golden callouses at the bottom of each finger. They were rough, worn, useful hands.

"They stopped jumping. I still sleep out here once a week."

"That must be difficult," I said. "Even in winter?"

Cracks of daylight shot through the wooden panels of the barn. It would have been hell in winter.

"Of course," he said. "That's why I drink so much *Guinness*."

I thought about how cold I had been the previous night, in midsummer, after several pints. He must have to get through a whole keg.

"I think it's time to get her out, John. Are you ready?" Christoph rubbed his palms together. I felt queasy. The silage had a smell that reached down my throat and hooked at my stomach.

"What do I have to do?"

Christoph attached a set of calving chains to the protruding hooves – making a loop around the fetlock, and just below the knee.

"Pull when I say. Easy! We pull out and down when she is straining, and try to ease her out when she isn't."

"Right." I still had no idea what to do.

Christoph double checked the chains and we took one each. The heifer groaned. It resonated around the barn, the whole landscape must have heard. We tugged at the chains.

"More!" Christoph urged.

I braced my knees and squatted, putting all my weight through the chain. I imagined it curled up in the foetal position, rolled into a ball with its head jutting out, hooves tucked beneath its chin, preparing to emerge into the mountain air. It wouldn't budge. It was a tug of war; two men losing against an unborn calf.

"It's not moving," I said, chains cold and breaking the skin on my palms.

"Shut up, and pull," he said, grunting as his top lip curled onto his gums.

We heaved harder, urging the calf out. For the amount of force we were putting through the thing, I would have expected it to catapult out and splat on the wall.

"Here she comes," Christoph said.

The head popped into view. The sac covered its face. Its head stretched the heifer's vagina to the point that it might split.

From there, it didn't take much to get her out. The chains jangled and fell slack as the calf slipped out from its mother and onto the floor. Its black skin was shiny, leathery, covered in gunk. Christoph quickly punctured the amniotic sac and ripped it away. A rush of afterbirth chased out after it, landing in a steaming pile. I dropped the chain, inspecting the blisters on my palms. The mother soon shuffled to her feet, licked the new-born, cleaning the fluid away with her pink tongue. Christoph hugged me.

The calf strained, trying to stand. I watched it use all of its force, willing its legs to work, trying to prop itself up and take its first feed. It was soon on its hind legs, but not quite strong enough to be completely free standing. It was doubled over, resting its weight on its knees.

"You can name her, if you like," Christoph said.

Flies fizzed around the afterbirth. The calf wobbled over to its mother, nuzzling into its teat. She was on all fours, fully fledged, tottering around on her new legs. I remembered the fact Eva told me once, about cows emitting enough methane to damage the ozone layer. I wasn't even sure if that was true.

"Call her Eva."

We washed up in the house. I had another shower and scrubbed the slime and hay and stink from my skin. I pulled my telephone out from my bag and called Eva. I didn't know what I wanted to say to her. I just wanted her to hear my voice and to hear hers, and to feel like everything was going to be okay.

I pressed the phone to my ear. Between the before ringing I could hear the thudding of my heart through my chest. She didn't answer.

I stuffed the phone back into my bag, got dressed and joined Diana in the kitchen.

"Hungry?" she said.

I was starving, but having only recently pulled a calf out of a cow's vagina, I didn't feel too peckish.

"We can have chicken and potatoes, later." She wore a blue and white apron tied closely around her neat little waist. "For now, I can poach some eggs?"

"That sounds amazing, Diana. Thank you."

Diana clinked a pan full of water onto the hob and flicked the gas on. Christoph returned from cleaning up, but in the same clothes.

"Chicken?" he said.

Diana smiled, "Yes, chicken. Always chicken for you."

"Thank God for chicken!" Christoph said, holding the raw bird aloft in two hands. He was like a kid after eating a bag of sweets. "Do you believe in God, John?"

His serious tone jarred with the uncooked chicken in his hands.

"Put it down, Christoph," Diana said. He dropped the chicken down on the counter, kissing his wife on the forehead.

"I'd like to," I said, wondering if it was a trick question.

"Well we have to baptise Eva tonight." Christoph shuffled onto a kitchen counter, letting his legs dangle on the cupboards.

"You baptise the calves?"

Christoph jumped down from the counter.

"Yes, all of them. I began baptising them when they started jumping." A ginger tomcat pattered into the kitchen, collar bell tinkling. Christoph scooped it up in his arms and scratched its chin. It purred. "Are you not baptised, John?"

“Yes, I was, as a baby.” You're assigned faith the same as lung cancer or dementia. It's all out of your control.

“And what about now? If you could be without religion, you would be?”

“That's a decision I don't need to make,” I said. Christoph kissed the cat on the nose.

“Diana, tell John your story.”

“What's this?” I said.

“My wife has proof of God,” he said. “Something that happened to her, years ago.”

“Christoph,” she said. “You know I don't like to tell this story.”

“Please.” Christoph dropped the cat and pulled a chair out for Diana. She picked a plate out of the drying rack and put it away in a cupboard. “Diana,” Christoph urged.

Diana picked a broom from the corner and swept crumbs into a neat pile by the door. She ignored him.

“I don't want to speak of it,” she said. “I hate remembering.”

“It's a very troubling story,” Christoph whispered to me. “It's a special story, Diana. I promise I won't ask you to tell it ever again, just tell John what happened. I've made him curious now.”

I was curious. Once there's something to be known it's unbearable to go without knowing it. Diana stopped sweeping. She had her back to us, facing the door. After a moment, she untied her apron, hanging it on the back of the door, then joined us at the table.

“This is not an easy story for me to tell,” Diana said. “But it is true, every word. So please, don't question it. I cannot explain it, but it happened.”

“Of course,” I said. Christoph nodded.

Diana licked her finger and dabbed at tiny crumbs on the table top.

“I visited London,” she began. “Years ago. I stayed with my cousin, in Clapham. One evening it was late, and very dark, I was lost. I was alone, completely alone. Just me,” she said.

“Sure,” I said. She looked confused at why I had spoken. “I know Clapham.”

“The only way I knew to get home was through a dark alleyway, a tunnel. There was a man there. A big man, alone, right in the middle. He was waiting there. I thought about it a while, about whether I should

do this or not. I thought I could pretend to be on the telephone, but he would know. I thought something bad would happen.”

“Tell him what you did, Diana!” Christoph clapped his hands in anticipation. It didn't seem to matter that he had probably heard the story a dozen times before.

“I said a prayer. A few words, for protection, safe passage. And I walked through the tunnel.”

The water bubbled up to the brim of the saucepan.

“It was fine, I walked through past the man and nothing happened.”

The tomcat jumped up onto the counter, sniffing around for something to eat.

“But that's not it,” Christoph said. “Tell him.”

“Give me a chance,” said Diana. “I was called to give evidence, soon after that night, as it turned out that man *did* attack a woman. He raped her.” She paused. Christoph squeezed her hand. “Right there, he did it. The place where I passed through just fine.” She locked her fingers together.

I was silent. Hairs on my back prickled up like pine needles. “Do you believe the prayer protected you?”

Diana ignored me. She didn't look at me or Christoph. She just stared into the table.

“In court, I saw him, the same man, on trial, I knew his face. He was charged with rape and 5 years in prison.”

“Is that it?” I said. I wasn't sure if either of them heard me.

“When I gave my evidence, my statement, about when I was there, and was it him I recognised, the judge asked him why he didn't attack me, why I wasn't the victim – something I had been thinking about ever since I heard the news.” Tears lingered on her cheeks. The water spilled over the saucepan, bubbling and evaporating over the edge into hot air. Christoph jumped up and reduced the gas, bridging a wooden spoon across the saucepan.

“You'll never guess what he said.” Christoph picked up the cat and cradled it like a babe.

“He said, 'Why would I attack her, when she was walking with two big men?’”

“But she was alone that night, completely.”

That evening, Christoph, Diana and myself went out to the barn and baptised the calf. Christoph lit candles in jam jars and hung multi-coloured bunting along the wooden beams. Diana and I watched as Christoph patted the calf on its head.

“We are gathered here today to baptise this child,” Christoph began. “And to recognise that she is the child of God.”

“Does he always do this?” I whispered to Diana.

“What do you think?”

Christoph held the calf's face between his hands and kissed its head.

“Water is used in this ceremony to symbolize the water of life,” he continued. “Let us remember that the water used in this baptism is the symbol of immersion in the life of God. The life of God surrounds us, fills us, and flows through us, as us.” He signalled to Diana.

She handed me her candle and picked up the red bucket, then poured some water over the calf's head. The calf jolted and tried to squirm out of Christoph's grasp, but he held on to the animal tight, dipped his index finger in the remaining water, and marked out a cross on the calf's head.

“Baptism marks the beginning of a journey with God which continues for the rest of our lives,” he said. “Let this be the beginning of our journey with Eva.”

The candles flickered around the barn. I walked outside with Diana while Christoph tended to the calf. The hillside was in darkness, the distant lights of Luzern fizzled out one by one, like fingers pinching out the flames of matchsticks.

“Has he always been so religious?” I asked her. We were standing a little way down from the barn. Below us, telegraph poles punctuated the shoreline, connecting a wire all the way around the hillside and down into the basin, to Luzern. The lake looked completely bare from our viewpoint, all of the sailboats tied in at shore. The empty tongue of water stretched between the dark mountains, and along through the valley.

“That was nothing,” she said. “He used to drive the calves down to the lake and baptise them in the water.” A few more lights flicked off in the town. “It was all after I told him about what happened in London. He was never a believer in anything before that.”

“He's very content with his beliefs,” I said.

“Yes,” she said. “A calf was born on Christmas day a few years ago, he called her Jesus.”

"It didn't seem to matter that it was a girl then," I laughed.

"You could punch him in the face and he'd be convinced it was a message from God."

"Well it's amazing, what happened to you," I said. And then, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean amazing, just unlikely."

She ignored my blabber.

"Do you think you will sort things, with your girlfriend?" she said.

"I hope so," I said.

"I think you would do better to travel alone," Diana said. "Women are nothing but trouble." She laughed. In the darkness I couldn't see the creases around her eyes and mouth. She looked just like Eva.

"I don't know. I want to see Eva," I said. "Even though it would be good to just forget about her."

"Eva? Do you not like cows?" Diana asked.

"Oh, no," I said. "Eva is the name of my girlfriend."

She laughed.

"I thought we had something in common."

Christoph wandered out from the barn.

"John," he called. "I'm going to have one beer before I go to bed, if you would like to?"

"Yes," I said. "I would."

He walked back into the house. Diana and I stayed outside.

After a minute, Diana said, "So what happened with Eva? Why did you break up?"

"She said it's because we are so far from each other."

"But you are here now," Diana said.

"I know," I said. "Women are nothing but trouble."

"Some things just can't be explained." Diana stroked the hair on the back of my head. I felt like a six year old boy again. "Will you go to see her?"

"I might do, tomorrow. To say goodbye."

"Maybe," she said, her hand moving away from my hair and resting on my shoulder. "Of course, she won't want you if you chase her."

"No?"

“If you want her to want you, you have to make it very clear that you don't want her. So you should probably get as far away from her as possible.”

We both laughed. The ginger cat rubbed its head against my leg, pacing a figure of 8 between my legs.

“I want you to know something, John.”

The pine trees along the hillside shivered in the breeze. The picket fence away to the left of the farm rattled as loose barbed wire clinked on the metal gate. The cat ran away.

“What is it?” I asked.

“You cannot tell a soul” she began, pausing to lock her arms across her chest. I noticed her breasts jiggled up towards her collar bone. “I mean that. I have never told anyone this. Especially Christoph.”

“Of course, Diana.”

“I just have to tell someone.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“What I told you about the alleyway in London, about how I prayed to God to protect me,” she paused. Her eyes weren't looking at me anymore; she was staring out at the lake, into the starless sky. “I made it up, John,” she said.

Silent tears streaked down her cheeks. She was breaking down.

“Why?”

“To protect Christoph.”

“From what?” I asked. She moved closer to me, wrapping her fingers around my forearm. Her wedding ring pressed cold against my skin.

“It was me,” she said. “I was attacked.” She buried her head into my chest. I wrapped my arms around her.

“It's okay,” I said, as you do when the worst things happen.

As I held her, I watched more and more lights go out in the distance. One light glowed brighter than any other. I looked at it for too long, daydreaming, wondering what it could be illuminating. It dazzled me. I winced and drew my eyes away from it, burying my nose and face into Diana's hair. But the light was

blinding – the glare had made an impression on my sight. It fogged my vision. I rubbed my eyelids with my fingertips, trying to make it go away. I could see it behind my eyelids when I closed my eyes.

I could see it, even when it wasn't there.