

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/4

Gavin Broom

Getting Past The Receptionist

I phone Victor's office. His receptionist tells me he's in an all-day meeting and then asks if I'd like to leave a message. I give her my name then she asks what my call is regarding.

"I heard a song on the radio this morning," I explain while I sweat and tremble. "It's a song I haven't heard in twenty years. Not since the car. Victor will understand. Tell him I heard the car song."

"I'll be sure he gets the message."

"Please, can you ask him to phone me or to come see me as soon as he's available, because it's, um, I'm a little freaked out."

"I'll be sure to let him know you called," she repeats. She hangs up without confirming any part of the message back to me.

I spend the rest of the day worrying that she took the message down wrong or misheard my name or will fail to convey the importance of the fact that it was the song from the car all those years ago. The more I worry, the louder the echoes of the song become. In the end, I deadlock my front door and hide the key in a dark corner of the attic.

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I phone Victor's office. His receptionist tells me he's on an external training course.

"Couldn't you have told me that yesterday?" I ask, snippier than I'd intended but I woke this morning with the car song in my head and it's left me panicky.

"It was only decided at yesterday's meeting," she explains, careful not to apologise. An apology about something outside one's control, Victor used to insist, is insincere and useless and therefore a waste of breath.

Again, I ask if she can get Victor to call me as soon as he's free.

She starts to say, I think, that she's not sure when he's due back, but before she finishes she must decide that I've already hung up and so she sighs, "Oh," before the line goes dead.

While I wait for his call, I try not to think of the car song, the key, the attic or the stepladder I've dismantled and whose components I've hidden around the flat. I manage this by watching TV with the sound turned down and concentrating on the drips coming from a kitchen tap. It's dark outside when I begin to wish I still had Victor's home number.

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I phone Victor's office. His receptionist puts me on hold even though I beg her not to. Luckily, the hold music isn't the song from the car. I don't know what I'd have done if it had been.

When she comes back, she tells me that Victor is in a session at the moment and asks if she can take a message. Pinching the bridge of my nose, I explain that I've phoned every day for the last three days and already left

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messages that have been ignored or haven't reached him. The receptionist makes no comment.

"Does he know I've already phoned?" I find I'm shouting, trying to hear myself over the car song that's blaring round my head.

"Surely."

"Surely? What does surely mean? Does he or doesn't he know I've phoned?"

"I don't appreciate your tone, sir."

"I'm sorry," I say, though my apology is neither sincere nor useful. "It's just that I haven't been outside for three days and I need food and medicine and ... and fresh air and I really, really need to speak with Victor."

"He'll surely call you."

I phone back every hour. Each time, my call is left to trip on to the office voicemail where Victor assures me, in confident, rich tones, that he'll get back to me as soon as possible.

At around eight o'clock, I'm surprised to find that I'm halfway through punching my parole officer's number into the phone but I chicken out before the final digit because I'm scared of what will happen if I reach her and she finds out I have a phone line in the house.

Immediately after I hang up, someone rings the doorbell. When I peek out of the window, I don't recognise the car parked outside. I assume the press have tracked me down after all these years so for the next half hour, I hide below the window and I must take less than thirty breaths.

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I phone Victor's office. His receptionist acts as though she doesn't know who I am or how often I've called and puts me straight on hold. After a short wait, there's a click, the hold music dies and I think I've been cut off. Then, there's a voice.

"Hello?"

In my head, I sit up. "Victor?"

"What do you want?"

Although the phone is clamped between my ear and shoulder, I take a moment to adjust the mouthpiece so it's no longer dropped below my chin. My stomach lurches; partly from hunger, partly not.

"Victor, I've been trying to get you all week. Didn't you get my messages?"

"You have no business calling me. You shouldn't be leaving me messages."

He's trying very hard to disguise the tremor in his voice.

"Did your receptionist tell you that I heard the car song?"

"I don't have to protect you. I won't be threatened by you."

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My brain swells. "If you returned my call four days ago, maybe I wouldn't have to threaten you."

"Call me again and I'll be calling the police."

I realise how I must've sounded, panic and try to backtrack, talking over him, repeating over and over, "I wasn't threatening you. I wasn't threatening you."

"Don't call me again. Don't visit me. Stay away from me ..."

"Victor, I wasn't --"

"... and stay away from my daughter."

The line goes dead.

I let the phone fall to the floor and my concentration returns to my hands and the final rung on the stepladder as I screw it back into place.

GAVIN BROOM lives in the Scottish countryside with his wife and cat. He's had work accepted at SFX, Espresso Fiction, Bound Off, Jersey Devil Press and The Legendary amongst others. At time of writing, he doesn't own a house at the beach.