

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/1

AJ Kirby

What you don't understand about a PPI holiday is this...

Saw Rich in Kutz the other night and he was up to his usual tricks, you know, like making sure everyone saw just how big his new watch was: I mean it was like a fucking sundial on his wrist. (I've never worn a watch. Can't stand life being dictated.) Mind you maybe he needed a big watch because he'd thickened up some and he must have studied himself in some pretty special mirrors at his pad if he hadn't noticed. I mean we're talking some circusy shit here. (Con vex or cave I never know which one. But an eye-con all the same.)

Course he was tanned, as per. San Tropez or Hawaii. Somewhere hot he could beach himself, the whale.

Soon as I saw him I felt a flutter in the core of me but I watched him a while and it was as though he'd gone slow, you know? Was running on a different playback speed to the speed we used to have when we were itemed-up.

Weight can do that to a man. Can stodge up the joints and dough up the braincells. (I call it the padding of privilege when I'm being polite.)

And there was me multitasking: chewing gum nine to the dozen. Firing down beers. Biting the limes and tossing them over my shoulder for luck. Looking at Rich. Chatting to Todd and Ray. (Rich wouldn't let Todd and Ray in the pad once upon a buttcrack. Made them hang on the street like feral creatures might mark their territory on the Persian.) Hmmpf. Dancing my legs under the table. Picking out texts, tweets. Wondering why there's no Dislike button on Facebook because those new pix Charlie put on – that party on Main Street – were fucking embarrassing. Sniffing. Pinching my nose. Checking for residue white powder. Looking at Rich.

Fucking lazering my eyes into him so he had to fucking know.

(Wild, man.)

And it was like I knew Rich had spotted me and I knew he knew that I knew, but still he waited while he finished his convo – so polite, you know – and I mean I could have grown a shaggy hobo-beard in the time it took for him to acknowledge me.

But anyway finally he slouched over and he was all like acting as though he hadn't seen me for an age and wasn't it a lovely surprise, but at the same time I could see his eyes darting down to our tabletop which was, you know, literally covered with beer bottles because you can drink more than you can even imagine when you are on this stuff. (And that, sir, is one major pro. Con is you look sucked dry and rangy and all kinds of feral but horses for courses is what I say.)

Rich-o looked like a regular politician. Colgate smile which never reached his piggy eyes. Slacks which looked made of steel (i.e. not slack at all, but supposed to look that way). Slip ons. No socks. Hair slicked back so tight he might have soaked up after that BP disaster.

Rich-o looked in two minds: his bestial, priapic self wanting to slide into a seat close enough so I can feel his love-handles against me; his

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/1

restrained, upper class self wanting to take fucking flight. Venually he had to come over all hug-an-Aids-baby politician though. You know him. Mwahed the air next to my face.

Was all like hello you because he always called me you and made you sound like you were the only you in the world. Even if you weren't. (Which I wasn't.)

And I was surly like you know I can get and sometimes I'm like that just to send myself up and sometimes I don't even know if I'm being ironic, arrogant, or simply drunk. Slugged back some of my beer as though that'd help. (Didn't even touch the sides.)

Anyhoo, was dark in Kutz and our table was away from the striplights so Rich took a while before he gave me more than just a cursory once-over. When he did, he did it like this: he closed one eye and opened another making it look like a magnifying glass and me feel like a pinned down insect.

And then he was all like you look dead. (And this wasn't dead as in very but as in dead. No future dead.) And then he comes over all concerned all of a sudden and, well, you know Rich. Very touchy-feely. And what he did was he put his hands on the trunk of me and felt the gilet which is what I wear under my, you know, tee, so as I look as though I still have a bit of timber on me and I'm not just skin and bone.

He told me I felt dead too and after he'd said it he put his hands up to his face and he looked like that painting The Scream. (I had my phone under the table and I texted Todd. Said that was what Rich's cum-face was like as well. And Todd laughed so hard he spat beer on the table. Rich said come on let everyone in on the joke and then it was stone quiet for a while.)

But Rich hates silence, always had and he soon had to fill it. He said he was wrong, he said what he meant was I didn't look dead I looked like the past.

Which I could have taken in about ten ways. Which I almost took as a compliment: I was his past, his touch-stone to the wild days. But then, being me, I said what I look like is a lean, mean fighting machine.

He winced as though I had raised a paw to bear-club him. From memory I reached out and pulled him into a hug instead. Felt strange like touching something made of a play-dough.

After, Rich looked as though he wanted to leave so I said don't. I told him let's shoot the breeze like the good old days.

And I could see part of him – that part he usually denied – wanted to. Wanted to throw in all his chips and go all-in for a night of debauchery with me. Go back to when I was his bit of rough, his hey babe walk on the wild side, his Falstaff.

Maybe he just wanted to toss his head back and laugh.

I offered him a beer.

Rich sneered. Clicked for champagne because he won't have beer. Never did. Cholesterol. (Really a man might feel sorry for him. When we

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/1

cohabited his side of the fridge was like an upmarket farm shop and all he ever ate was like nuts and seeds and yet he put on weight simply from looking at my cream cakes, simply from smelling my pizzas.)

(Wild, man. I pulled a blade on him once when he was naked and alone in the wet room. Scared the I'm a kid, this is my cerayzee stage right out of the fucker it did.)

Anyway because it was Rich, over they brung a bottle. Don't do table service in Kutz for anyone else but they do him. He's as near as they get to celebrity.

He cracked it open. (And I swear if they let swords in Kutz, he'd have swiped the cork out with the straight edge of one. That was one of his party tricks. Another was/is his belief that everyone in the world wants to hear about how successful he is in his job, working for daddy's firm now he's assumed the mantle, shunned his old pals and lovers, become serious as cancer.) Poured two flutes. None for my feral chums, Ratty and Moley. Chinked glasses himself as it was clear I wasn't going to bow to him and whatever.

Begun the beguine with his work-chat. His future-chat. I tuned out thought about the past. (When we were younger - Todd, Ray and me - we used to tell ourselves nobody could party like we could. Nobody was as wild as we were. When I met Rich this bore itself out. He used to listen, wide of ear and mouth, as we told him of our feral escapades. And I think he wanted some of this wildness to rub off on him... Now I know he just wanted it for an anecdote. I was his motherfucking external hard drive, could host all the viruses and shit. He could plug into it for a while, not let it infect him, and then go along on his merry way after. Trouble was, we just never knew when the party was supposed to end.

And if this sounds like me whining then I'm not. I like my life.)

Ventually Rich said where have you been the past few months and I told him holiday. And I swear, for a beat, two, envy greened his eyes then on account of we only ever took one holiday together. He looked me up and down checking for a tan. Made some crack about wanting to see my white bits.

Todd made a massive sniff and said he was going to go see about his own white bits. Ray went off with him.

I slugged more beer and then sat with my arms crossed over my belly.

Rich said what was I acting all defensive for.

I shrugged.

Sneered.

He said was I on something. Had I not knocked it on the head yet? Didn't I know what damage it would be doing to my body? Did I even want a future?

I sneered again. I might have growled. Might have said your moms would have remortgaged the country pile for a drug does what mine has done in terms of weight-loss.

Wilderness House Literary Review 9/1

He probed some more and I could tell he wanted to know if I'd been on holiday with anyone so eventually I snapped in his face. Said it wasn't like the holidays he was thinking of. It wasn't on a yacht like the ones his godawful family used to have and it wasn't like the ones him and his Richie Rich fraternity chums used to go on either.

Rich put a hand on my knee. What was it like then, your holiday?

(Towards the full-stop of us, he came over all kinds of ornery about what he called my 'extravagant lifestyle'. What he really meant was my recreational drug-taking. What bothered him most was I always spent my half of the rent money on my weekend binges meaning that his daddy-dearest had to constantly foot the bill for the whole of the rent. I mean, at the time, Rich was acting like it was his money I was spending and it wasn't. Nor was it like was I living off of the state. Same now. I could see he was all like how can he still live this high-low life? Doesn't he have to get a, you know, data entry job or someshit?)

But I'd found was a legitimate loop-hole, just like rich folk find their legitimate loop-holes. S'only fair.)

I told him about the PPI holiday. Seven bastard grand I got off of the bank for that and I'll fucking enjoy every red cent of it, just like he enjoyed his 'coming of age' money.

Rich rolled his nose, like PPI holidays stunk. Then he said what I was really on was a holiday from life, from responsibility.

I said so what.

He said there's no helping some people.

I said maybe I don't want to be helped. I'm wild man. Live life day to day. No present, no future. Just what we have here today: beers on the table and a baggie of speed in the back-burner. Todd and Ray's anecdotes on tap.

Maybe if I at least pretended I was trying to find myself – and by that I mean the boring straight-laced non-holiday me – he'd have had a bit more respect.

But fuck him.