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# Bright Side

## Edward Hogan

A year after her husband died, the council erected a streetlamp on the cul-de-sac, directly outside Cyb's house. Was the world too dark? No, certainly not in the suburbs of an English Midlands town.

The streetlamp was at the exact height of her bedroom window, and it blasted a noisy orange light over the back wall and the dressing table and the bookshelf and the bed. Particularly the bed. It made her feel like she was living inside a throat lozenge. Fifty-two years old, and for the first time in her life she couldn't sleep.

She hung a sheet of blackout paper. As it was August, she needed the window open, but the breeze flapped the blackout, so the light flared intermittently, which was worse.

After two weeks without sleep, she was in bits. Fatigue, forgetfulness, professional mistakes. Cyb worked for the customer services department of a white goods company. David, her late husband, had taught people to drive.

She began to hallucinate at home. As she drank her morning coffee, the articulated lamp in her peripheral vision briefly became a shoebill stork – a massive, ugly African water-bird she'd seen on Attenborough. It had an oversized beak like a giant clog and an extra pair of eyelids – slick, milky membranes.

At night, Cyb longed for additional eyelids. Preferably made of lead. But all she had were these two useless flaps of skin, increasingly swollen, and yet increasingly permeable to orange light.

It was unfair to call shoebills ugly. To other shoebills, they may have been beautiful. Not all of them, of course. But out there somewhere was the Clooney of shoebills, the Beyoncé of shoebills. Every shoebill had a mate.

Cyb asked the neighbours about the new streetlamp. Three of the women on the cul-de-sac were called Jill. 'I hadn't really noticed,' one Jill said.

The second Jill found the light reassuring. 'When my Roy stumbles home from the pub, he needs all the help he can get.'

The third Jill admitted she'd petitioned the council for the streetlamp. 'We're all getting older, and some of us – as you know – live alone. It's a security measure.'

'You didn't ask them to put it slap bang in front of *your* house, though, did you?' Cyb said.

Jill tutted. 'They said it was the optimal position.'

'For who?'

'Maybe you should buy a blindfold.'

'You mean a sleep-mask?'

Jill shrugged.

Before she'd ever seen David, Cyb's friends had talked about him with admiration. 'He's just a great, great guy,' they'd say. But they wore a sad, strained expression as they spoke. Cyb couldn't decipher that look. She'd wondered if David was a woman-beater or an

alcoholic or voluntarily celibate. But it all made sense the night they first met, at a Christmas party. A dark red birthmark covered the entire left side of his face.

At first, Cyb didn't know where to look, but as they began to talk, she got used to it. David asked so many questions. He wanted to know about her colleagues, where she grew up, her family. They sat together on the sofa, and she found herself telling stories. Before she knew it, two hours had passed. Her nerves danced like the sequenced lights on the host's Christmas tree. 'What about you?' she asked. 'What do you do?'

'I'm a driving instructor,' he said. 'Do you drive?'

'No.'

He swapped places with her, sat down on her left side. 'Look ahead, up the road,' he said, gesturing beyond an imaginary windscreen. He gave her an empty plate for a steering wheel, and talked her through the acceptable hand positions. Ten and two. Eight and four. He glanced at her from the passenger seat, his birthmark now hidden from view. 'It's the perfect job for me,' he said. 'They only see my good side, at work.'

She dreamed of amniotic sacs, of drowning in Lucozade, of high-diving from David's stiffened tongue into a pool of egg yolk. She couldn't wake from these dreams, because she wasn't really asleep.

In her bedside drawer, she found two scrunched-up sleep-masks – the type you get free with a travel set of cosmetics. One was office-chair blue, the other an oddly sexual pink. She put them both on, one over the other. They were useless. The orange light picked them apart in seconds.

She ordered a serious mask off the internet. It arrived from Japan in a rubber case, and was black, with owlsh recesses on the inside to prevent pressure on the eyeball. When she tightened the security straps around her head, there was a sucking sensation. It was good and dark in there.

Lying in bed, she sank into the void, but soon woke with a disturbing realisation: beyond the mask, the room remained bright. Even though she couldn't see them, the big orange triangles still slashed across her bed, her body. The light still throbbed on the wall. You could cover your eyes with NASA-grade Kevlar, but it wouldn't make the room any darker.

She pulled off the mask, flung open the window and glared at the streetlamp, with its corrugated cone of plastic, its stupid tin hat, and its coterie of crazed moths. 'Fuck you!' she shouted.

'Bit harsh, I'm only having a quick vape,' said a big-nosed man below, wafting away his caramel-smelling mist, and scratching his left calf with his right foot.

Cyb ducked back into her house, and re-dressed the window, aware that her breast had spilled from the side of her nightie.

Human Resources signed her off work because of the crying, and some foul language that had found its way into customer-facing emails. She was contractually obliged to visit her GP, a young blonde woman to whom Cyb explained the sleeplessness and the streetlamp. The doctor went through all the sensible suggestions and the 'sleep hygiene' strategies, then blushed, and quietly asked if Cyb had tried masturbating.

Cyb leaned forward and whispered, 'Yes. It's *brilliant*, isn't it?'

The doctor prescribed anti-depressants.

Autumn came. How quickly the nights drew in. What a phrase: *the nights drew in*. She thought of terror suspects hooded with drawstring bags, the cords pulled tight.

Earlier and earlier, the streetlamp came on with a weighty click. Whatever she was doing at that moment, she'd freeze, her foot raised on the stairs, or her knife lodged deep in the green flesh of an onion. At first, before the sodium vaporised, the light would shine pink and that was fairly pleasant, but soon the jaundiced glow prevailed, and her house began its descent into the orange world. It was as though the colour had risen to the surface of her furniture, like blood to slapped skin.

*I'm not someone you meet for the first time twice*, David used to say.

No point drawing the curtains. Each evening, the shoebill would land in the garden, or she'd see it strutting along the cul-de-sac, investigating Jill's rockery. It lifted one leg, the huge toes of its feet collapsing like some fold-away kitchen mop.

Cyb wandered the house, avoiding windows. In the bathroom, she found the little leather wash bag David used to take on holiday. It contained the free sachets of moisturiser she'd collected for him, the Bic razors, the miniature bottle of bright pink Gaviscon. In the mirror, her face was half in shadow.

For holidays, they'd always travelled by coach or train, David not wanting to drive because of his job. She remembered many restful moments spent on public transport. It gave her an idea. Anything was better than moping around the house in this eternal twilight.

So, the next afternoon, she ambled down to the bus shelter and caught the number six towards town. She sat near the back and put her head against the window, felt the engine resonance in her skull and neck and shoulders. Along the A6, branches scraped the windows, but even that soothed her. By the time they got to the Palm Court roundabout, she'd fallen asleep.

When she woke, it was dusk, and the almost empty bus was parked at the depot on the outskirts of town. Cyb pulled in those slow, colossal, post-sleep breaths. The young bus driver swung down the aisle, checking under the seats for rubbish. He was about thirty – a bodybuilder with a shiny face, and hair stiff with product. The short sleeves of the bus company shirt clung to his arms, which made him look strangely babyish. 'Rise and shine, duck,' he said.

'I must have missed my stop.'

'A fair while ago, I reckon,' he said. 'I tried to wake you.'

'Sorry.'

'You'll have to shift, now, though, because they're doing a decon.'

'What's that?'

'Decontamination.' He nodded outside, to a group of men in white overalls and backpacks, filing out of the depot shed.

'This bus is *contaminated*?' she said.

'They all are,' the driver said.

Cyb tried to stand, but dizziness overcame her and she stumbled sideways and crashed into the seat across the aisle.

'Christ,' the driver said. 'Are you sick?' His hands were raised as if to catch her, but Cyb could sense his reluctance to get involved.

'I'm fine. Just a bit woozy.'

She tried to walk again, but her left leg buckled beneath her. She grabbed a pole, and accidentally rang the bell. 'Next stop, please,' she muttered, trying for a joke.

'Bloody Nora,' the driver said, wincing. He glanced around, as though looking for help or witnesses. He took his mobile phone from his pocket. Compared to his hulking upper body, his legs were thin, and his trousers didn't reach the top of his shoes. 'Do you want me to call someone?' he said.

'There's nobody to call.'

He checked the time and sighed. 'We can't stay on the bus. Tell you what, come to the café, sit down for a bit, till you're steady. I'll buy you a coffee.'

'I can buy *you* one,' she said.

As she followed him off the bus, she heard the wet padding of large three-toed feet behind her.

In the depot café, they took a window seat. Her mouth felt warm and sour with sleep, her eyes sticky. This was a joy.

The driver's name was Marco, and he seemed more relaxed, now, amongst people. He produced a sweetener dispenser from his top pocket. Cyb declined.

'So, you've been riding the bus all afternoon,' Marco said.

'I suppose.'

'Do you do that often?'

'First time, I think.'

'Listen,' he said, and then paused. 'Not being funny, but do you have a place to stay?'

'What do you mean?'

'Are you homeless?'

She laughed. 'No.'

'Okay. Good. It's just that my sister was homeless, at one point, so, you know.'

'Oh. I'm sorry.'

'No, it's fine. I'm glad you've got somewhere.'

'I've just been having trouble sleeping, and the bus helps me nod off,' she said.

'It can be quite lulling.'

'Not what I want to hear from my driver, Marco.'

'Ha-ha, yeah, no.'

'My husband had a driving job, too,' Cyb said, looking out the café window at the lumbering, prehistoric buses in the yard. 'His legs got very stiff after a day in the car.'

'Yeah, that happens.'

'He used to do yoga in the evenings, to open the hips. He might have taught you to drive, actually, if you learned around here. He was an instructor. David?'

'Nah. The fella who taught me, he was disfigured. He had one of those big red wine stains on his face, you know? I think his name was Robert, or Rob. Nice guy, though,' Marco said, checking his phone.

Cyb stared at him, but he didn't look up from the screen. He'd received a message which made him smile.

They finished their drinks. 'Well, I'm done for the day,' he said. 'Will you be all right getting back?'

'Yes, thank you.'

'Hey,' he said, passing her a leaflet. 'There's an autumn offer on coach travel. You can get out into the Peaks, dirt cheap. A right good kip!'

'I might do that.'

The driver of the return bus was a woman, and Cyb fell asleep again, woke two stops from home. When she walked into the cul-de-sac, the streetlamp blazed, but she felt rested. She gave the pole a friendly shove and went into her house.

Upstairs, she sat by the window, elbows on the sill.

*Port wine stain.* There were other terms for other birthmarks: salmon patch, stork bite, strawberry navel. Who came up with these names? Much of David's everyday life had involved looking after people who were upset or flustered by his appearance. The bank-tellers and car mechanics, the shop assistants and taxi-drivers. He made them feel all right, like they'd been tested, in encountering him, and they'd passed.

Despite his best efforts, some people still freaked out. Cyb recalled a daytrip to London, and a woman who'd screamed and fled when David asked her for directions. Cyb had called after her, 'Don't be so pathetic!'

'Let's just buy a map,' David had said.

Tomorrow, Cyb would go to Ladybower Reservoir, on one of the cheap tickets Marco had mentioned. She'd go early, just after daybreak. She'd stand on the gravel shore, in the blue-grey light, refreshed after a good long sleep on the furred seats of the coach. And she would watch the shoebill wade out into the shallows, alert for prey. She'd watch him cock his head back, before thrusting that bill violently into the water, down into the darkness, after something she couldn't see.