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By Gwyneth Jones

After summer 2002's bizarre display of jubilee-, sport- and media-fuelled nationalism, replete with bunting, flags, street parties and other nostalgic symptoms of the Po-Mo crisis of belonging, we thought the only possible response was fiction. Here Gwyneth Jones - science fiction writer, critic and author of *Bold as Love* - converts the psychic trauma of 'UK Summer 2002' into a short story...

1. The Blue And The White

Kulak knew before he had been in Brighton ten minutes that they were going to kill him. He had travelled by train, to avoid the stop and search roadblocks that would be making motor travel into town hell on earth. He was alone, disguised and maintaining phone-silence. He'd got away with it at Victoria, but in the Brighton concourse his heightened, super-acute senses had told him immediately that he'd been made. The enemy was armed: he saw automatic rifles, openly displayed. The sense of danger thrilled him, as he surged with the heaving crowd of singing, shouting fans, scattering the old ladies, the soft domestic males, the women with kids, who hadn't had the sense to stay at home. Stripped of his car and his mates he was naked, and his reputation meant that there would be no mercy: but that was just the way he liked it. Passing through the forecourt gates he caught the eye of one of the riot-visored police... and stared, deliberately.

My name is Kulak. You know me, but do you know what that means, ignorant pig? It means I'm a hard-bitten, smart, feared, man of the people, immune to your social controls. Take me down if you dare.

They let him through, with barely a glance at his ID.

So that's their game, he thought. No bullets. Plain clothes police assassins moving with menacing slowness through the crowd, using Kulak to guide them to the comrades. But he had many faces, many aliases. He shoved his way across the road, into a pub, and minutes later had emerged from the cubicle in the lav in faultless drag, his 'trainspotter' outfit stuffed into a stylish pink duffle. He paused to check the mirror, while the men at the urinal peeked and leered: he feared no suspicion. Bold tarts are always muscling into the Gents in crowded situations. Women, he thought. Fuck 'em. They don't deserve the attention they get. If the enemy took him now, and beat him and raped him in some dirty cell, he would feel her pain with a vicarious thrill. But it wouldn't happen. He was invincible. The coppers should have opened fire in the crowded station while they had the chance, but the bastards hadn't dared to do that. Morality is weakness. As he left the pub, two (Concealed Weapon Squad) Brighton policewomen, standing at the bar, glanced at each other and shook their heads. They'd watched the transformation scene in the lav on their wrist screens. There was a CCTV camera in every gents' public toilet cubicle in the town: perfectly legal, and perfectly visible; for the citizens' own protection.

'Some mothers do have 'em,' muttered one.

'It's a shame to take the money,' said the other; and they laughed.

But Kulak saw the Queen's Road, engulfed in Union Jacks, laid out before him like an emblazoned, canopied parade for a conquering hero. In the lav he had transferred his blue and white cross of Scotland lapel pin, from inside the hood of his 'trainspotter' anorak, to his bra-strap. It would have been safer to bear no mark at all of his allegiance, but honour is more than safety. He could feel it there, like a hard, ironic, secret promise. Here we go, here we go, here we go.

The girl was kept spreadeagled on the bed, tied by the wrists and ankles. Popstar posters on the walls, duvet with a pattern of hearts and teddy bears: she'd been raped, and raped, for five days and nights. The guys let her get up to use the toilet, and fed her on biscuits and water. In one bizarre scene Tom, the plumber, had been seen feeding her crackers, while Harry the law-student porked her, one hand behind him to hold his trousers so his jerking bum would not be on show. Harry's modesty, which had become a running joke, made the other guys hysterical; the girl, whose name was 'Boobs', sobbed open-mouthed, spraying poor Tom with masticated Sainsbury's High-Bake.

When the rescue squad broke in she'd been left on her own, crying in the dark. Released, she clung to Maudie, raised her bleared, docile underclass face with a smile – and then frowned in puzzlement, because they'd moved her out of shot (of course, she knew exactly where the cameras were). She was still wearing fragments of her clothes: the blue dress bunched around her middle, torn remnants of her knickers. They made her roughly decent and got her out of there, then Maudie and Trevor took her to the safe house which wasn't far away. Success of phase one.

2. The Red and the White

The town centre had been closed to traffic, everyone would have to walk to the Brighton Centre, where a vital match of the greatest sporting tournament of the year would be played out today. The police reported three hundred thousand people pouring through the flag-smothered streets, insanely more than the venue could hold: but the fans didn't care. The TV stats were recordbreaking: topping 15 million British viewers alone, two hours before kick-off. 'Who's got the rest of them?' muttered Bridget to her best mate, Raisa – fellow production assistant on Fantasy And Truth, the brilliantly successful cultural comment show. It was a joke, but Raisa had a literal mind. House of Correction, she answered, seriously. 'They changed their schedule, remember, for the tournament? Really in-your-face of them.'

House of Correction belonged to a rival company, and FAT had been snubbing them, in spite of their ratings. The cheek of House of Correction, in switching from late night to mid-afternoon, for the benefit of people who 'weren't interested' in the great national sporting event' had been relegated by FAT to news snippets, and noted as a big mistake. Bridget giggled cynically. She had been shocked when she started working in television, and found out that the notorious gang-bang show was actually real, not faked at all. But she'd got over that.

'What about Battle Royal?'

Battle Royal was Middle England protestors, having pitched fights with the developers' security and the police, over the routing of a new motorway up in the Midlands somewhere (Bridget was unsure of the geography). It was proving to be very good TV. 'Battle Royal is next week, girls.' Colin's richly nuanced, mocking voice made them both jump. 'Let's concentrate on patriotic passion this afternoon, shall we? How about a few more flags in here, eh?' FAT's presenter, handsome, groomed and gleaming, was something of a national icon himself: and he knew it. He left them, shortly to reappear on the monitors, as the run-up started running. FAT was doing an intellectual round table, a stylish choice sort of forced on the show by the fact that the BBC had cornered actual commentary and expert discussion of the game itself.

'What many people don't realise is that this is highly environmentalist,' said a famous female academic. 'EAT IT! tells us that it is not what we consume that pollutes, it's what we don't consume. It's not what we use that causes the extremists to protest, it is what we, er... our waste and excess –'

'Environmentalist,' murmured Raisa, 'Protests...'

They were supposed to be tracking peaks in the focus group polygraph response to buzzwords: but Bridget's mind wandered. For ages and ages she had been the ditz who still thought that EAT IT! was just an incredibly stupid and gross game show, something you wouldn't even watch if you were drunk and lonely and stuck with nothing to do on an early Saturday evening.

She'd been living in the past, imagining that 'sport' meant things like football, and cricket, and tennis; and maybe strange things like rowing, that only got famous when there was an Olympic Games. Or snooker, that was annoying because they put it on in place of Bridget's favourite interactive fantasy programme. Then suddenly, it had seemed as if she woke up one day to find the ...er, stuff, was everywhere. All over the television, all over the newspapers, all over people's conversations. She wasn't stupid. She understood that it was totally important for people to have something to wave the flag about; and that EAT IT! had the major, major advantage that the English team was not going to get knocked out in the first round, causing the audience to switch off en masse, and infuriating the advertisers. She understood that in twenty-twenty UK, outrageous fun is what everybody is having, and she didn't want to be a prude. But excuse me, isn't the Pooh-Stakes just a tiny bit disgusting?

In her early days on the show Colin had taken her aside and spoken to her sternly about remarks of that kind. That had sobered her, briefly, because she loved her job, but she'd gone on giggling whenever she forgot herself, which was often. The whole thing was just so blegggh and silly. Her awakening had come, with a total shock, when she looked at her payslip one month and noticed, good grief, a huge MINUS figure, big as a mortgage, where her pay ought to be. Luckily, (and thank God, before she'd made a complete fool of herself by ringing accounts), she'd remembered a little inside-pages newspaper item, which had said the government was now allowing private companies to buy up student debts, as a tax break...

She could still get teary-eyed and shaky if she let herself remember that awful moment, or if she let herself think about how the minus figure, which of course got bigger every time she was 'paid', might keep her the bondservant of whoever owned her debt for her entire life. Being sold into slavery by your government isn't exactly what you expect when you have three A levels, a bright personality and a fairly good degree in media studies.

But she tried not to think about it, and mostly succeeded.

She had stopped laughing at the Pooh-Stakes, from that day onward. She understood what it was all about, now. Put on your shortest skirt, flirt with the boss, agree with everything he says, or you will be heading down porcelain alley with the brown stuff. And that isn't funny at all.

The rest of the squad disbanded. Only Maudie and Trevor were directly involved in phase two. Maudie, who was a doctor, examined Boobs and found her to be in not too bad shape, considering. They gave her new clothes and money, and told her where she was. They told her she was free to go, but they advised her to lie low here for a few days, before she got in touch with her family or friends.

They had to keep her in the basement, because they understood that she was not very bright, and she wouldn't be able to remember things like not to open curtains. But she was comfortable: bathroom ensuite, TV, nice food. She ate heartily, though she'd been childishly thrilled to discover she'd lost eight pounds! during her ordeal. And this was the hardest part, because they had to spend time with her, it would have been cruel to leave her alone. But it wouldn't be for long.

They sat and talked, in the safe house kitchen, doing a bit of soul-baring. Maudie was a retired GP, Trevor was an off-duty community constable. Maudie had started off in eco-protest, which she now realised had been just selfish NIMBYism. She'd thought nothing of the rest of the mess, until her own patch of lovely countryside was attacked... Trevor believed in the law, in justice, and protecting the gentle people from the bastards of this world, but being a policeman is an authority-kick. He knew he enjoyed that; and that the nice, spruce uniform was a factor –

3. The Green and the Gold and the White

Kulak reached the Brighton Centre an hour before kick-off, still maintaining phone silence. His authority was such that he didn't need to communicate with the shock troops. They would not meet until they had witnessed the victory of Scotland the Brave, which was absolutely certain, because the Welsh were crap at the postmodern beautiful game: and then, going into action like the superbly trained commando agents they were, they would rip the Brighton Centre apart, dealing a crushing blow to the morale of the English team, whose home stadium this was. They knew the price of this action would be high. Kulak and his men would be trapped inside the building, when the police counter-attack began. They had no fear, no regrets.

The organising body of EAT IT! had decided, after what happened last year, to limit the mayhem by moving the crucial matches away from the national teams' supporters: which was how Wales came to be playing Scotland in Brighton. The ploy was having limited success, judging by the hordes of ticketless Welsh and Scottish fans in full regalia, who could be seen in the huge crowd on the seafront, chanting and rushing the barricades, ignoring police loudhailer instructions to disperse. But the mood was good-humoured. There were big screens, heavily guarded by armed police, so everyone would get a chance to see the match. Everyone here would feel specially a part of the event that was driving the whole country wild with excitement. Little did the police know that their defences were futile. A cold and brilliant mind, impenetrably disguised by the bold tart persona, Kulak approached the security gates. Already he could feel the razor-sharp satori of the violence to come. It did that to him. When he went into action with the blue and white warriors, everything vanished. He was so focused he didn't know what he was doing. No shame, no guilt, no pain. He placed his duffle on the X-ray machine roller, stepped up to the mark and smiled for the camera with chilling confidence. He sashayed through the metal detector and presented his perfectly forged ticket, with the appropriate photo-ID. (He had many, he was always prepared.) A guy like a brick outhouse in a yellow fluorescent bib picked up the duffle from the roller, peeked inside and smirked. So what, fucker?, thought Kulak, noting that face for later attention... Cross-dressing isn't a crime.

'Ooh, bejusus,' said the EAT IT! security officer who had taken Kulak's ticket. 'A special ticket. Bring your bag and come with me, Missis, or is it Sir? We're giving you the deluxe treatment.'

Next thing Kulak knew, he was being strong-armed along behind-the-scenes corridors, determined to keep silent though it cost him his life. No leader is indispensable. The shock troops would go on without him. He was shoved into a bare, grey hangar of a room, with oil stains on the ribbed concrete floor. A half-dozen big men, wearing stewards bibs or security uniforms, were waiting there. The men who'd brought Kulak in sat him on a metal-framed canteen chair, jerked his arms round the back of it and got handcuffs on him. Kulak stared defiantly. 'You're not the fuckin' police,' he said. 'You can't touch me.'

They laughed. With one motion, as if they'd choreographed this, they stripped off the bibs and the EAT IT! uniform jackets – revealing T-shirts emblazoned in gold and green and white, and printed with the map of the four counties. Oh, God. A shudder of horror went through him. He had fallen into the hands of the Irish, the most feared of all hard bastards in EAT IT! hooliganism.

One of the former ‘stewards’ pulled up another chair and sat down opposite Kulak, four-square. ‘The fockin’ polis fockin’ sold you to us, eejit,’ said the Irishman. ‘An’ you’ll tell us nothin’ becos there’s nothin’ we don’t already know, Kulak alias Jayne Busty, alias Firestarter, alias wee Robbie Thistle, alias a phone book of other fockin’ stupid pseudonyms. We know why you’re here, you and the other haggis-arsed boyos. Now we’re going to tell you our plan.’

Kulak’s eyes were drawn, irresistibly, to something that stood on the floor beside the other man’s chair. It’s white, it’s ceramic, it’s a china bowl, with a handle, shaped something like a teacup for a giant... The big Irishman smiled.

‘We’ll have the gentleman down to his smalls, lads.’

What’s that beside the teacup? A knife and fork, laid on a white napkin.

The men uncuffed him, and made him strip to the ‘bold tart’s’ push-up bra and lacy thong. They found the concealed weapons: his cosh, his knuckles, the dismantled plastic gun in the false bottom of the duffle; his make-up bag of ammunition. They said he didn’t understand the terrible beauty that had been born out of this last grotesque flowering of the national pride of the UK, but today he would serve the beautiful game more truly than ever before. He was to lead his troops in a pitch invasion and destroy Scotland’s victory.

Kulak agreed immediately, weak with relief.

They laughed. They told him words meant nothing, he must show his respect in a more solid fashion. Horrified by the urgent pulsing in his bowels, he cowered as the men loomed over him. When they showed him their heated electric curling iron, fear the betrayer took him by the sphincter muscles. He performed, right there in front of them; and when that was done, they made him take his own excess, and chew, and swallow. In abject tears then, only anxious to please his new masters, he babbled the truth: he warned them that an invasion would not have the effect intended. Scotland the Brave would be given a replay and beat the snivelling Welsh another day.

‘Mebbe so,’ said the chief of the Irish. ‘Except, Lizzie Mountbatten is ours, too, my lad. Your team captain has took our money to thump a punter, namely you: an’ after last year, you know what that means.’

Disqualification from the tournament.

Kulak was appalled. Lizzie, though a mere tart, was the hardest little bad taste merchant ever to come out of the glens. No one could touch her glory.

‘Oh, God, please no!’ moaned Kulak. ‘No, not Lizzie! She wouldna!’

Boobs sneaked out of the safe house at around two a.m. on the night after they had rescued her. Maudie and Trevor watched her leave on their own infra-red surveillance. They tracked her progress as this determined teenager made her way across town to the secret location where the House of Correction was filmed and crept back into the mock-up suburban house where she had been held prisoner. They had known that she would do this. There was no hope for Boobs. House of Correction ‘stars’ were chosen through an audition process designed to single out the terminal cases of celebrity culture.

But she was a different playmate now. She was carrying polio and a virulent form of anthrax, engineered by the terrorist cadre using generic biochemical supplies and information downloaded from the internet; and a human form of myxomatosis, stolen from a government lab at Porton Down. They switched on the TV and saw her welcomed back into the game: her escape from the do-gooders would

be a huge boost for the ratings. With any luck, no one would suspect a thing until all of Boobs's contacts, the TV people and the eager amateur rapists, basically, started dying... They checked their suicide note over carefully, printed it out and took their own pills. Terrorists who believe their cause is just must die, if they are prepared to deal out death themselves.

'Suffer,' said Trevor, 'with hope, or without it.'

'Suffer,' agreed Maudie. 'But someone's got to stop this.'

The policeman and the middle class lady gave each other a hug, and shook hands. In a few hours, each of them would suffer a massive heart attack. It's a very painful way to go.

4. The Jack

The live audience (composed mainly of English and Irish fans, with a small enclosure of carefully vetted and contained Scots and Welsh) roared as the teams marched out and took their places at opposing ends under the glare of the TV lights. Union Jacks flailed madly. The Irish and Northern Irish match officials found fault with the state of the pitch, causing a delay that was discussed with inventive but increasingly strained logorrhoea by the team in the commentators' box. EAT IT! etiquette prevented them from remarking on the effect of all the hot lights on the vat of brown solids that played such a vital part in the first-half ritual; but this whole thing stinks...was getting hard to avoid.

Nobody up there knew that the real reason for the delay was to give Kulak the opportunity to muster his cohorts and announce the new battle-plan.

'This is the ideal popular sport,' said the prominent Asian novelist on the round table, back in London in the TV studio. 'A final squeeze of the majestic peristalsis of capitalism, freeing our competitive instincts from the absurd complexity and needless athleticism of the past. EAT IT! has a profound purity –' They were on a break, but he wasn't taking any chances. Pundits can fall down porcelain alley too: he never bit or even nibbled the hand that feeds.

'Capitalism,' murmured Raisa.

'Mm,' said Colin, looking thoughtful. He leaned back in his comfy chair, and announced quietly, addressing his production assistants off the set, 'Girls, I'm getting feed from Edinburgh. Before we go back to Brighton, can we come up with some soundbites to deal with an English defeat?'

Oooh. This was the first year the tournament had gone fully international, with French, German, Japanese and USA teams participating. The English were supposed to be in an easy group, but rumours had been growing that the national coach was not happy and the team was not in good shape for the US match, scheduled next week in Scotland... Bridget was surprised to find she genuinely felt her heart sink. England losing, it can't be good, however silly and bleggh... Wow, she thought. Maybe I'm learning to be content with my lot. That's a result! She thought about it, and offered into her headset mic:

'Err, how about, defeat would be an iron turd, grinding into the faces of the working classes forever?'

'Oh, I like that!' Colin laughed, eyes sparkling. The female academic and the Asian novelist smiled politely. Then the presenter frowned.

'Hm, I'm not sure. Can we say working classes on television?'

'No,' said Raisa, unexpectedly. 'It sounds stupid. Say, all the people.'

'Okay, the people it is'

The shock troops had agreed to the premature pitch invasion readily. The plan to wait until after the game had always been a little subtle for them. The moment came. Jon MacReady, thirty-something unemployed university graduate from Midlothian, dressed once more in his male clothes, received the Irish signal, and stood looking at the scene below: a little lost, a little hesitant now, at the last. Strange thoughts went through his mind. If the EAT IT! captain herself would take a fall for filthy lucre, what price does national pride have for anyone? What's behind it all?, he wondered. Isn't this flag waving, chanting and brawling over nothing rather meaningless? Am I really so stupid and cruel, in my original nature? Could I change...? But his head cleared, his throat opened in a warrior's roar. The blue and white commandos rose up.

An uncontrollable free-for-all ensued, in which the contrived stunt with Lizzie proved irrelevant. EAT IT! vetting measures had failed: most of the live audience rushed to join the secret army, and the teams themselves entered furiously into the fray. The Wales-Scotland game ended in anarchy that would leave four contestants (as the players were known, for old time's sake) dead, plus a never-released number of punter casualties... But for Jon, there came a second moment of epiphany, down in the mêlée. Suddenly he understood everything. He knew that sectarian pride is but a trumpety thing, and that Lizzie's defection was true to the deeper code. Raising a shit-smeared, transfigured face to the bright TV lights, he yelled in ecstasy: 'I LOVE Great Britain!'

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