

Best Man Speech

Actually
doing the
properly wrapped
he so cool.

(BAILEY is about to give his speech. He has a large wrapped present in front of him.)

BAILEY: Well. This is the present. Get it? Present.

I expect you've all had presents |
you'd rather not have had. This is the present |
I've sort of dreaded. This is the present moment. |
And me, well I'm the best man they could find. |
Miranda and Addy. Addy, friend of my youth,
and I wish you'd leave my youth alone, he's shy,
and Miranda, blushing bride, only not blushing,
congratulations, may you – blush forever.
Blushing best man, it ought to say. It's me |
alone in the present moment, I'm the one |
the light's caught. You can't stop me,
can you, it's my moment.

Look at the lovely bridesmaids. Don't they look
lovely. They're not blushing either. Sammie,
Jade, and Tabitha. On their behalf

I answer the toast, I answer the toast. Hey, toast,
the answer's no. You're going in the toaster.

That was my first joke.

(It says here: 'Wait for laughter to die down.')

Splendid. On we go.

Now. You're probably wondering about my present,
my humble offering to the happy couple.

There's a prize for guessing what's inside. Clue:
it's a high-tech device for *easy listening*.

State of the art. I tell you, cutting-edge,

it'll blow you away, trust me. Now, who am I...

I should have started there, my mother did.

My name is Bailey. I do have a first name,
but they took it at the door. I've got this ticket

to get it back, but till that time, I'm Bailey.
 It's simpler for Addy, that, just the one name.
 Some of you regulars at this elite
 venue, the Maple Vale Country Club,
 might know me by my other name of 'Barman,
 where's my bloody lager?' or perhaps
 'Oi, caddie, that's a friggin' five-iron!' Well,
 caddie, barman, waiter,
 those are my slave names. But for once I'm here,
in with the cream. I ought
 by rights to raise a glass to the supremo
 who made the Maple Vale Country Club
 what it is today, but as you know,
 he happens to be the groom, and he's had enough
 compliments for one day, though, having said that,
 mostly in his own speech. So I'll merely
 thank the staff on duty here today,
 (suckers, having to clear up after this lot,
 whoops, there goes some more)

After → (*He throws his drink over his shoulder.*)

and say how very pleased I am to be
 among what we always call 'the bastard public'.
 (Shouldn't have said that, Addy, should I, no,
 looked good on paper.) Anyway, I'm speaking,
I have the floor. Yes, I hear him going,
 you'll be mopping it this time tomorrow, Bailey.

Let's talk about today. Today began
 for me at dawn, alone on the west beach
 at 5 am, *almost* alone, alone
 with a drunk unconscious man who suddenly
 sat up and said, 'This was a fine idea!'
 And here he is, green at the gills and married,
 and here am I, who saved him from a fate
 even worse than marriage, or at least,
 well, neck-and-neck with it. I refer to death.

Look at me. I only gone and done it.
 Mention the one thing it says you never
 mention in my handbook. Rule One,
 the Golden Rule, don't mention it! And now
 I'm only drawing attention to it, aren't I?
Look at the present, here, look at the present,
 take your mind off death! Now you're thinking,
better stop him speaking, he's not funny,
 we feel *un-entertained*. Who is this *Best Man*?

Only his oldest friend. Addy and Bailey.
 A to B non-stop, you're there in no time.
 But if you know the two of us you'll know
 there's really four of us: there's Addy, Bailey,
 Croft and Dennis, sure, it's how we met,
 Mr Hackett's classroom seating system.
 We were all herded into the far corner
 at age thirteen, and somehow none of us
 ever got over it. Even now, our mates
 tend to begin with letters higher than F,
 and anyone called Williams or Yates
 you shouldn't be in here. It's true. Ask Croft,
 he's out there somewhere, Dennis? I can't see him,
 he's out there somewhere. Anyway, believe me,
 we were the Alpha Boys. Now, chance is chance,
 and just some way along from the Alpha Boys
 there sat the Alpha Girls, or Alpha Girl.
 Ah, he's remembering, he's the blushing groom,
 he's thinking: Bailey, don't unwrap the past,
 unwrap the present! No sooner said than done!

(BAILEY unwraps the present to reveal another wrapped present.)

Did you hear the music stop? I can never hear
 anything but the music stop, and the parcel
 always comes to Bailey. Now there's people
 staring at me, people I don't know,
 and nor do you know me, so you don't know

my sense of humour, you have no idea
if you can step in. And they're filming this,
I see him, I see all of him except
his face, all he can see
is mine. If you start saying 'enough's enough'
and wave your arms and barge into my light,
you'll be the high point of this video,
the fool who didn't get the joke! Horror!

The Alpha Girl was Kelly, known to all
as Ashtray. Don't ask why. I think her name
was something like it, but who cares? The Ashtray.
We all know what we mean. The girl who no one
wants around, but then she's always there,
grinning away, all teeth, all lanky hair
and spots and what we're talking is the works.
We're talking your worst nightmare,
except it's ours as it begins with A,
you with me? Here's a story about Addy,
a tale of love and cheating, with a sting,
a revelation, and a true confession...

So we're I don't know, fifteen, and there's this party
A, B, C, D, all the gang, we get there
in Dennis's old man's car, except for Croft,
who rides his brother's moped – this will prove
no mere detail – anyway so we're there,
and girls are there, the girls we wouldn't mind
going a round or two with, so to speak,
and we're playing it cool, we're thinking, as you do,
tonight may be the night.

(Not in Addy's case, I should just mention,
Addy's got form, he's been there, got the T-shirt,
but since Miranda's looking at me again
I won't go into detail. Let's just say,
the rest of us have not got half a T-shirt
to rub together, and those days there was enough
rubbing together going on. For you old folks,

we were all virgins. Down the hatch.) Meanwhile, the four of us are smoking in the garden, and then it starts to rain and we leg it in, and it's like the world just ended. Party's over. The girl whose house it is has gone. Her parents, are I don't know, in China.

Probably still there now. So it's deserted.

It's bucketing down, remember, Addy? And Dennis, we been ribbing him all night, says suddenly there's someone in the hall, and there she is, the Ashtray, Kelly Ashtray, in flesh and bone and about a hundred bangles, and no one else but her.

And I'm telling you, this house was in the middle, not in the middle, way out on the borders of nowhere. People I knew who came from nowhere had never heard of it.

And the entire frigging caravan had split to some hot spot, where we were not required, and the Ashtray's all but naked, and she's coming on to us, can you believe, she's making eyes at us, it's a bit too much for the Alpha Boys.

So Addy and Croft and me

we get in the corner and figure out this plan that Dennis can make his mark, can post his first achievement, shall we say, now it sounds crude, but boys, you know. And then we only hear it, his daddy's car out there and see the bastard running up the drive, and our main hope of rescue's scuppered. Now there's Croft's moped.

'I'm off,' he said, 'and I ain't taking two.'

It's his idea to cut for it, he's got

his deck of porno cards, and it's best of three,

Addy v Bailey, winner rides away

on the back of the bike, loser spends the night

with all that that entails...

Ashtray's in the corner, sort of weirdly
 slow dancing with herself, and there's us three
 shuffling cards and praying. Addy's gone
 to get a beer and when he's out of the room,
 Croft, ever a man with a sharp eye
 for trading, says: 'I'll rig the deck for you
 if you flash me thirty quid.' And he can do it,
 I've seen his cardtricks. I could be at home
 in half an hour, and all it's going to cost me
 is everything I've saved. Not even close.
 Now let me tell you, this is news to Addy.

He thought that fate had dealt him a bad hand!
 He's going to kill me! Anyway, he comes back,
 says he's feeling lucky, and we cut,
 and Croft has rigged it and I'm drawing kings
 and jacks and poor old Addy
 he's slapping down a three. So now, at last,
it can be told! We cheated, Croft and me,
 we left you there with Ashtray...

Addy, friend, mate, boss,
 your night of love – or as he always tells us,
 his night locked in the bog while she was trying
 to pick the lock – your night came courtesy
 of your best mates, and now it has been told...

This is a Best Man speech. What, did you think
 it would be easy listening? Did you think
 the news would just stop breaking?

*(BAILEY unwraps the present again to reveal a present wrapped
 in the News of the World.)*

Miranda and Addy, come a long way, Addy,
 a long way from the middle of nowhere
 to sit beside this beauty in her – beauty.
 A tale of true romance for all you hardened
 cynics in the room: why are we here?
 Why are we eating vol-au-vents and little
 triangles of salmon when we could be
 feet up at home, watching the football? (What's that?

Oh, apparently Croft
 is feet up at home watching the football.)
 Why are we here? Where did it all begin?
 With Four-Play. That's right, Four-Play.
 For those of you born yesterday, Four-Play
 is a golf term, as in the Four-Play Dance
 which is held on the last night of the tournament,
 so all the players, you know,
 can keep on swinging. So, I'd been caddying
 for four days straight for Mr Yamaguchi,
 and Addy lets me have these four free tickets.
 So I summon up some courage and I ask
 my heartache of the time, who shall be nameless,
 plus Dennis and someone Dennis
 wants to bring. That someone,
 as it happens, is this bride, Miranda.
 Anyway, I book a decent table,
 off in the corner, private like. Phone rings,
 that afternoon. It's Addy: 'Bailey, help me,
 Rob and Geoff are sick, don't let me down, mate.'
 And would you believe it, this man here agrees
 to work the bar at the Four-Play Dinner Dance.
 Born a saint, I was, can't help it. So,
 there I am, dispensing alcohol
 to the city's premier drunks, do I mean golfers,
 while my own table's having a night of it
 where I can't see 'em, in the private alcove.
 But it did afford me a unique perspective
 on love, romance, and matters of the heart.
 Or should I call that matters of the liver?
 A tale of love and getting 'em in. First out,
 waitress brings their order: pint of best,
 that's Dennis. Diet coke with ice, my ex,
 Chablis, that's classy, must be this Miranda,
 and so it goes like that:
 pint, coke, Chablis. Pint, coke, Chablis,
 every half hour, then it's every twenty,
 and I can't see what's happening from the bar,

the waitress just keeps coming,
 with pint, coke, chablis. About eleven,
 my ex has had enough of gooseberry time,
 and gets a taxi home, something about me,
 girls just can't get enough, anyway, she's gone,
 same ending. Pint and Chablis,
 pint and Chablis, and then the order changes,
 pint, Chablis, scotch-and-a-twist, aye-aye,
 scotch-and-a-twist? Okay,
 I know who drinks said beverage: this man,
 my mate, I mean, my boss, I mean, the groom.
 Next thing I know it's a pint plus vodka chaser,
 champagne, scotch-and-a-twist. I read the runes,
 I'm Sherlock bleedin Holmes: Dennis is rattled,
 he's moved to spirits, she, new girl, Miranda,
 has made a friend of Mr Bollinger,
 while Addy's keeping steady with his usual.
 There's a slow dance at midnight and I see it,
 I see it, history made, him and Miranda
 in the light of the glitterball and I get a single
 order for a *Depth-charge*.
 Dennis has lost the plot, he's ordering stupid,
 and when the dance is over it's more Bolly,
 a magnum for the alcove, one o'clock,
 two glasses, two cigars? Two cigars?
 That means no hard feelings, that means someone
 won and someone didn't. Night wears on.
 A limo home for two, then one last order:
 one last, lonesome cigar,
 and a double brandy, and I'm pouring it
 up to the brim for Dennis, my good friend,
 when the waitress tells me 'Change that to a bucket,
 Bailey, party's over.' There you have it,
 correct me if I'm wrong. I did think Dennis
 was out there with his lovely...is he not?
 He didn't make it, right. You got his name-card,
 right, and next to him you'll find his wife's
 lovely name-card, lovely. Wrong to talk

behind somebody's back, but he's not here
so where's the harm?

But he'd tell you no hard feelings, and it's true,
that was the night they met, in the Tudor Room
these love-birds of the alcove, I was there,
your correspondent in his Maple Vale
tuxedo and his Maple Vale...cravat
I think you call it.

Anyone care to guess what gift I got them?

(He unwraps the present to reveal a present wrapped in black.)

My old mum used to say you can't go wrong
with black. You'll never guess,

or not until too late. Yes I do know,
Sammie and Jade, I do know what it is,
it's an easy listening device, did I say that?

It's helping you to listen to my stories.

I mean, we can't help making stories, can we?

Addy, all these business friends of yours
are very still. They want to hear my stories...

And here's a very short one:

BANG! It's a bomb I got in here, do you know that?

So this particular love-chapter closes
with me in philosophical discussion –
eh? Is it really a bomb? What do you think?

The evening ends with me in deep discussion
at 2 am, sloping against the bar,
with Mr Yamaguchi, who decides

my rife has got no rove. I say, 'I'm sorry?'

'Your rife has got no rove, Mister Bairey.'

'I'm sorry, my rife? I don't have a rife,
you have the long man there, Mr Yamaguchi.'

'No! No! Is you, you are the light man, Bairey!'

'The light man, Mr Yamaguchi, no,
I'm the barman.' 'Your rife has got no rove.'

I get him a taxi and he gives me this,
this card he's got, and you may well be asking

*Longt needs to
be about 1/2
2.5*

'What has this got to do with anything?'
 but I may well ask you how can you know
 which little arrows point nowhere, and which
 are pointing at your head, so sit back,
 sit back, Sammie, Jade and Tabitha,
 sit back and blush, bride,
 sit back, be satisfied,
 sit back, Mr Proud-as-punch, sit back,
 Mr That's-him-married-off-to-his-own-kind,
 Mrs I-will-never-wear-this-hat-again,
 Mr and Mrs Cousin-who-don't-like-us,
 Old Mrs Have-to-invite-you-because-frankly-
 you're-fading, Miss I've-come-here-for-a-husband,
 Young Master Life's-a-bitch, and all
 you reratives whose rives have got no rove,
 and all you businessmen who sit so still,
 deciding when THE END will come, sit back
 because you don't know what's coming,
 and you only ever have to hear this story
 once, and then I'm gone, you with me, gentlemen,
 ring a bell? You look concerned, gentlemen,
 I'll set your mind at rest, in case you're not
 entirely sure if it's a bomb or not.

*(He unwraps the present further, to reveal, again, a wrapped
 black present, but in the cartoonish shape of a bomb.)*

That put your mind at rest?

Best days of our lives.

Best days of our lives. Always refers
 to something long ago. Always refers
 to time spent with some people who for years
 you made not the slightest effort to keep up with.
 Some days they must have been.

Well now you can. Bestdaysofourlives
 dot-com. There's a whole website
 of everyone you hoped you'd left behind.

'Web' as in a sticky thing you're trapped in.

'Site' as in sore eyes. But it's a godsend

for someone, isn't it, it's a godsend for a Best Man. A Best Man with the task of digging dirt on Mr High-achiever... So. I know my Yahoo from my Google, and I take a little look into the past, in bestdaysofourlives.com, and hey, there they all are, sitting there, the same, as if they never moved, like some forgotten weeds somewhere that grew in total darkness and the light finds them everywhere, remembering, enormous.

And I don't want to disturb them, 'cause that would seem like being from the future, like I'm from Star Trek, and my prime directive is not to change their world, you follow me? So I go from site to site, leave no trace, click, move, double-click, I'm scanning their depictions of their life-styles, and they all sound the same, not only that, they really talk as if those rubbish years in that shite institution for the stupid were really the best days they've ever...well, Latchett, case in point. Peter Latchett, or 'Thatshit', we were duty-bound to call him, Latchett was a footballer, a really talented star prospect, so, of course, me and Addy phoned him in a deep voice, said we were football scouts from Upton Park, wanted to check him out that Saturday. We go and watch him play, he's looking round for someone with a clipboard. No one's there, give him his due, he still plays like it matters, but no one's there. Point is, it gets a mention. His message on the website says: 'I once was scouted out by West Ham Football Club but now my only contact with the game is refereeing schoolboys of a morning...'

And of course they've all got children,
 somehow, was there time? Was that a class
 I missed, perhaps, there's all the school, all naked,
 and facing off in two straight lines and me,
 I'm smoking in the bike-shed, bingo,
 I'm childless, I'm a caddie,
 I'll hold your bag, crown prince.

There was this boy called Piper.
 Apparently. His message on the website's:
 'Anyone remember me?' I spent
 a fiver just to join the thing and tell him: *Disco*
 'No, mate, no one does.' He's a family man.
 Hope *they* remember him: 'Who's that ugly bloke
 in the garden, mum?' 'Search me.'
 But I have to join to get my message in:
 'Any tales of a disgraceful nature
 relating to Mr J M Addison,
 warmly accepted,' and I wait around
 to see what rolls along. Oh, I forgot,
 you also have the option on this site
 of pegging up a photo of yourself,
 and of the fifty losers from our year
 who've joined this club for dead persons, just one
 has taken them up on it. You guessed it.
 Kelly Ashtray, and I know I said
 her name was really Ashtray. It transpires
 her name was Kelly *Astey*, well still is,
 but bugger me, she puts the thing in brackets,
 (*Ashtray*), like she'd better go by that name
 or who'll remember her. So there's this photo.
 But *it can't be* the Ashtray, it's some woman
 made up like a goth and staring out like –
 looking at me like she's always looking,
 she never bloody stops, and you could say she's
 changed, she's lost a bit of weight, okay,
 her skin's cleared up, her mouth's shut, anyway,
 she's standing in what looks to me
 like a crime-scene but may be where she lives,

and there's her little message:

'Any time you're passing Bramble Park,
if you look up my flat's the flat above
the MOBIL sign.' Above the MOBIL sign.
O...kay, I'm glad I know that. Thank you, Ashtray.
Now any time I need a bit of Mobil,
I'll drop by, kill two birds.

Meanwhile: You've Got Mail.

I get some answers. Latchett wants to meet me,
Piper wants to meet me, this Piper
I've never even heard of, saying,
'I see you haven't lost your sense of humour,
Bailey,' and there's Warbeck, who we hated,
a W, you see, that lot were wankers,
and he says: 'Hey, are you the selfsame Bailey
who got a place at the royal acting school,
and said you'd be a star at twenty-five?

Are you related to that bloke called Bailey
who caddies for my dad at Maple Vale?
Maybe I got you muddled.' I can take,
you know, a joke against me, so fair do-s,
I decide I won't meet Warbeck, always was
a loser.

I meet Latchett.

The most boring night of my life, at least
till I meet Piper, worse. They have no stories.
Addy's their hero, man who made a mint,
man who made himself, not like me,
bloke who caddies, serves, mops. It's a wash-out,
the best days of our lives dot com, I'm going,
I'm disappearing up my origins,
painful, I can tell you.
So I leave the pub while Latchett's in the toilet,
and I'm running down the street, and right on cue
it starts to rain, thank you,
and my hands are in my pockets, and I find
this card I got from Mr Yamaguchi,

with a number scribbled on it. I can hear him,
 'You got no rove in your rife, Mister Bairey',
 and I don't know if *you* have,
 Mrs This and Dr That, but *I* don't,
 and something's telling me: this phone number
 is just what you would think, it's something dirty,
 but another voice is reading it as if I'm
 sort of a fool, an innocent like clown,
 and this is a number I could use to find
 some I dunno, some, *rove*.

So I call it, Sammie. I call the number, Jade,
 the man you have returning the gracious toast
 on your behalf is a man who calls those numbers,
 Tabitha, and it's ringing,
 and I'm in a call-box and it's raining hard,
 and that's the ledge I'm on. Somebody answers,
 I can hear my pulse. Listen. I said listen.
 The businessmen would like to hear what's next.
 A voice is saying go to Bramble Park.
 And I say I will, because it rings a bell,
 but I get directions anyway, and the girl
 is asking what I'd like. So, I don't know,
 so I say, 'I'd like the normal,' it just comes out,
 so to speak, 'I'd like the normal style.'
 And she says, 'Fine,' she sniffs and says that's fine.
 Then I hear her cough and she hangs up.

What, did you think this town was the one town
 where no one lived like that? Perhaps you thought
 this town the town it never rains,
 this town the town nobody's skint,
 this town the town nobody's lonely, *ahhh...*
 all of them I could have set you right
 that evening, had you been there,
 all of you who've never had a breath
 in common until now... Bramble Park,
 a little clump of trees between estates,
 and it's raining and it's dark, and by a bench

I see a woman opening an umbrella,
 waiting with her back turned,
 and I won't waste your time, you know what's coming,
 of course it's her, it's Ashtray,
 on her soaked patch of earth,
 this is her little park, and Yamaguchi's
 number is her number.
 She isn't skinny, but she's sort of wasted,
 white, a little ghostly, and her eyes
 made-up and running slightly with the rain,
 I notice, and her hair's tied back, but haywire,
 nothing's normal. I'm about to run,
 I tell you, I been through this film before,
 when Ashtray says would I like a cup of tea?
Would I like a cup of tea? I say no thanks
 and I suddenly feel I'm falling

and I'm sitting there, I'm saying milk no sugar,
 tick-tock, tick-tock,
 aren't I, vicar, aren't I, Sammie, I go there,
 I visit her little lodging, Kelly Astey,
 and it's like I stepped into some old rubbish soap
 I'd watched for years. I realise I've always
 wondered, had that sort of, had that wonder
 about some people, what was it like to be them,
 to have spun away somehow,
 from, I don't know, the heart of things,
 to live your tiny life
 with cups of tea and sitting in the park
 and making ends meet in the only ways,
 how do you get to find those people, Bailey,
 I ask myself, where are they, where's the world
that's sad enough to want them? Milk, no sugar,
 tick-tock, tick-tock,
 Kelly, thanks, I'm sitting here with Ashtray,
 I see the rooftops and it's wet and dark
 out there, the sun went down but in what city,
 is it mine at all, will I see it again? 'I know you,'

she goes, stubbing her fag out, 'you're the one
 at school, you were in plays.' 'I was in plays,
 true,' I go. 'As that was your ambition,'
 she goes, 'I heard you say so in the canteen.'
 'What was for lunch?' I can hear myself saying.
 'Something we didn't like,' she goes, 'some stew.
 I only liked the chips. I didn't like
 the stew but when they lifted up the lids
 it was always stew. I used to always say,
 "When will it be chips?" to Mrs Gladstone,
 and she always said it's always chips tomorrow.
 That's the law. She was a bit peculiar.'
 Hell, I've no idea, I may as well be
 on Pluto at this moment, it's so weird,
 and I'm staring at the ashtray, no, the ashtray,
 and her fingers resting on it,
 and talk goes back and forth, talk of great subjects,
 stew, chips, but no one's saying much
 about the fact I phoned her on that number,
 so it's a relief when she lights up, and says:
 'I can't do this with mates, if you don't mind.'

And someone's tipped the bowl of the world I live in
 and everything's gone awol, 'cause I'm now
 some mate of Ashtray's. 'Right,' I say, 'that's, well,
 that's sensible.' 'Finish your tea,' she goes,
 and I think she's kicking me out and please God,
 let her be kicking me out so I can maybe
 start my life again, have a bunch of children,
 or make a bomb the way I learnt to do
 when I was caddying for that old guy
 in demolition, he was a class golfer
 for someone with no fingers, ring a bell?
 He shot an 81 and tried to give me
 fifty quid as tip, I said no thank you,
 I asked him how you make a bomb. He said
 that isn't worth a fiver, and I begged
 to differ. Anyway,
 'Finish your tea,' she goes, and it's a question,

and I have, and she fills it up and a flaming hour
 I'm sitting there as we watch the conversation
 die together.

Addy, my dear friend, my old companion,
 for you I get the drinks in for the drunkards,
 for you I caddie all my afternoons,
 for you I sought the duller of the dull,
 for you I was rejected by the freak
 nobody ever wanted to go near,
 and whiled away the hour with PG Tips
 and her old snapshots. Tick-tock. Tick-tock.
Been your Best Man before, is what I'm saying,
long time before I pulled you from the sea
at dawn this morning and just stood there watching
your new lease of life.

Then when I leave, and my resolve is made
 to live a different life, somebody else's,
 so nothing in the earth will ever bring me
 back into this kitchen to sit down
 face to face with her,
 she says, 'You ought to come again to visit.
 Look.' And I say, 'Look at what.' 'Just look,
 look,' and so I follow where she's looking,
 and there's a bottle there, in a crowd of dusty
 bottles on her window-sill:

Bailey's Irish Cream. 'That's your own bottle,'
 she says, 'it's got your name on it! I won't
 touch it till I see you!' What is it, folks,
 the thing that keeps the thing we ought to take
 and bin forever – beating in our minds
 like it's alive? 'Cause I was back next week,
 on a wet Wednesday afternoon we sat there,
 sipping Bailey's from an Arsenal mug,
 until I'm drunk enough to put my question.
 The thing I told myself is the only reason
 I'd come back to sit there.

‘So, you remember Addison – Addy?’
‘Yes.’ ‘He’s getting married. I’m the Best Man.
So I’m collecting stories.’ ‘True stories?’
she says, she’s at the sink, she’s washing up,
she’s dressed in black, in a long skirt, somehow
she doesn’t look too bad, she’s got a date,
she tells me, not a customer a date,
but I don’t care, I’m sitting with my Bailey’s,
having this adventure. ‘Right, true stories.’
I’m wondering if she’ll bring back that party,
the night of my escape, when we cut cards.
Addy always said he shut himself
in the bog and went to sleep,
while she was outside trying to pick the lock,
so then I’m thinking, what if there’s a scoop,
or something Addy never got around
to sharing with us? ‘I know something, Bailey,’
she goes, ‘and it’s so true it’s not a story.
I mean, it’s got no end. But you’re his best man,
so I can’t tell you.’ ‘Who do you think I am,’
I’m pleading, ‘it’s his wedding, I’m not going to
skewer him on his wedding day.’ ‘Miranda,’
she says, and I’m surprised, ‘is the bride’s name.’
I’m wondering why she’d know, and she leans over,
has another sip, and says: ‘He told me,
that Japanese.’ I say to her, ‘I know,
my rife has got no rove,’ and she says, ‘Bailey,
you’ve come to the long prace.’

Long prace, wrong place, you see. We had our first
in-joke. Now our time together, our
I don’t know, connection had a shape,
had its own flavour, sort of. Its own fravour.
‘I’ll come to yours on Fliday.’
‘What, on Fliday the ereventh?’
You had to be there, Tabitha, Jade, Sammie.
Just old bones to you, you dig us up
it’s all you find, yellow bones and in-jokes.
Centuries to come they’ll figure out

these two had a religion that involved
 this strange sweet fluid. I went back for more,
 I drank from my own bottle, my Bailey's,
 didn't throw up, I sat there, with Kelly,
 passed the time of day, but they weren't times
 you lot remember, three o'clock, three-thirty,
 Wednesday afternoons, she'd kick me out,
 politely but fair's fair. She had a job,
 she had 'employment'. Said she was a worker.
 Said she was on her day off. Then I said
 I'm on my lifetime off, my rifetime off.

She grinned like she was grinning through a mask
 that wasn't grinning, that was welded on.
 Like something lit a candle in her eyes
 she wasn't meant to light. A fire-hazard.
 Illegal. Like her mind had this one landlord
 watching her. This - 'randrord'.

What do we know if no one tells us? Nothing.
 All that's there to go by's what we see
 done in the world, that's for us or against us.
 Stuff was done against her, you could see.
 Look at you three bridesmaids.
 You can sulk until you turn the colour
 someone's dressed you in,
 but everybody in your world is *for* you.
 Not with Kelly, I could vouch for that,
 how much was set against her. Why was I there,
 sitting through the silence or the small talk,
 remembering such pitiful small details
 of stuff so long ago as the tea goes cold,
 and the day clouds over, and the sodium lights
 come on, all pink, all orange.
 Why was I there that long
 if I wasn't trying to change the way it looked
 to someone, how I'd been? I brought it up,
 one day, one day I saw her, all about it,
 I said remember me and my two friends,
 cutting cards to get away from you?

'But I was ugly in them days,' she goes,
 'we were all ugly.' 'We were just boys,' I said,
 'we used to have a laugh.' We sat outside,
 the time I'm thinking of, the only time
 we ever sat outside...

and we're sitting on the patch of ground she shares
 with all the other tenants. 'You were boys.'

She was lying on the grass. She said: 'Well well.
 Forget it then.' 'Water under the bridge,'

I muttered, like it makes the water flow
 faster, cleaner, clearer,

makes it go away, but all it did

was freeze it in our thoughts. She lit a fag.

'Stew under the bridge. You're the Best Man,'

she said, and I somehow first time didn't get it,

I thought it was a compliment, like Bailey,

you're a good man, then I realised my error,

and 'Best Man' sounded like a mockery,

a curse, like being

Judas in a story, so I nodded,

'cause that's who I felt I was, both ways I did,

to Addy, who's my friend, and to, to Kelly,

for being his, his best man. 'If you're Best Man,

do you have to have a stag night?'

Well, you do. Have to have a stag night.

Boy, did we have a stag night. Croft and Dennis,

they could tell you stories, if the bridegroom's

lost for words, or could have if they'd come here,

and Evans too, and Foster, Harris, Latchett,

Mason, Mills, O'Reilly, Piper, Sedley,

Warbeck, Williams, Woods and Yates and all their

heartfelt little messages of sorry,

better things to do.

*(He throws many pieces of paper in the air so they flutter down
 around him.)*

But I can tell the stories, I'm here, Addy,
 I'm in quite tiptop shape, would you not say,
 for someone with two litres of black Smirnoff
 in his brains? Boy, did we have a stag night.
 And boy, did I do my part, I got the girls in,
 I got the strippers in, and a merry time
 was had by all, and on to this club, that club,
 any club, the six of us, the six
 Alphabet Boys, Addy, Bailey, Croft,
 Dennis, Evans, and Foster, on the piss,
 the Famous Five we were, and you couldn't stop us,
 Four Horsemen on the Piss,
 the Wild Boys are coming, lock your doors,
 they're all expected, all – all three of them,
 or is it two these days? The dynamic – couple.
 Never trust a barman when you're drinking.
 Two litres of black Smirnoff's what it looks like,
 but it's only mineral water. I'm an actor,
 remember, not your common-or-garden barstaff,
 your run-of-the-mill golf caddie, your two-a-penny
 garage bomb constructor, I'm an actor
 now, like I was that afternoon you told me
 if I kept in with you, someday I'd have
 a hotel of my own, I think you said,
 not a caddie shack, or a Maple Vale cravat,
 or two weeks holiday or the Wednesday off,
 but a hotel of my own. 'Forget it Bailey,
 London'll screw you up, the acting game's
 a racket, stick around with me, I tell you,
 sky's the limit, sunshine.'

Not so lost for words. Mineral water,
 mineral water under the bridge. She told me.

If I went to her little flat
 with Addy once he'd passed out, on his stag night,
 she'd tell me what the secret was, she'd tell me
 everything she knew. So I thought, okay,
 where's the harm in that? I'll be sober,

I'll give him a ride home when all the rest have staggered off, he'll pass out, as he does, and okay, let's see what's up. Let's see a thing we never knew we'd see.

(He very carefully removes the outer casing of the joke 'bomb' to reveal a device with a timer and explosives.)

The demolition man says don't move.
Simple Simon backs him up: don't move.

Look. She said the story's not a story, because it's got no ending, but I'm here today to give it one, and you may hear it once or never. It depends what's going to happen. I know there are some among you who, perhaps, know when a joke's a joke and, what matters more, know when a joke is not a joke. Some among you have probably calculated that, on balance, what you see is what you get. Look. But you don't know my sense of humour. Or, it may be the very ones who think they know me who have that pessimistic outlook. 'Ah,' they'll say, when they've been rescued, 'always knew that Bailey for a barstaff.' One of you in that camp, in that camp with the dark outlook, has probably been quite gently under the table tapping 999 into a napkin. Perhaps you have, perhaps I'll never end this story. All I ever said of this, this present that I brought, was that it was an aid to easy listening, and if you listen to me, all of you, *and we get it now* table twelve, table five, top table, we will reach the very end in one mind, in one piece, together. Now: what are you scared of? Can you not see him, Addy, your groom, your relative, your boss, your ex, your rival, your old sparring partner,

your enemy, your hero,
 a little worse for wear but otherwise
 alive, saved, still with us? What, did you think
 I changed him for a mermaid?

We cut the cards, the bridegroom and I,
 one evening all those years ago,
 when I was desperate not to be alone
 with that ragged hopeful thing,
 so I forked out and I cheated,
 got clean away and Addy stayed with Ashtray,
 the A gang, in a den. And what they did
 was to make love, as it's been technically
 referred to, what they did was to make love
 all night that night, because what he discovered
 is why she was despised by all the girls.

*Because there was not anything she wouldn't
 do to get some pleasure.* Where we called her
 Ashtray, she was known by the cool girls
 as Anything. Anything. When the morning came
 he'd gone, she was alone in the whole house,
 miles from anywhere. She was in love,
 she says, but she can't prove it, Anything,
 Ashtray, she was alone. The hour came,
 the day began, the week began to roll,
 and she expected something. She expected
 more of what had been... We will one day
 be studied closely, human beings, by something,
 and it will say in its language: 'These Were Ones
 Who Wanted What Had Been.'

We were the Alpha Boys,
 we noticed her, we ragged him when we could,
 she's looking at you, Addy, and he's stone,
 he blanks her in the corridor,
 he blanks her at the gate on the way home,
 he blanks her,
 and then one day he gets her on her own,
 and tells her this, she's shoved into a corner

and she's told: 'Yes, we can do the thing we do
when, and only when, I say we do it.'
Rest of the time you stay away from me.
Don't follow me, don't mention me, not ever.
Shake on it,' she's shaking, and she does,
she shakes on it, and for about a year
that's how it happens. Addy always says
he's circuit training and he can't be reached,
but he's with Anything in the little hut
along the beach, an hour, whatever the weather,
like the pair in the Swiss clock
stuck on a wheel, you see him when it's sunny,
you see her when it rains, you never see them
in each other's lives,
and this is fine by her,
because he's all there is, and this is all
he has for her. Time passes,
and she leaves school with nothing much to show.
Over the next few years we're all aware
of Addy's star, he makes it, 'sky's the limit,
sunshine', 'can you work this Saturday,
Mr DeMarco needs a caddie', 'sure,
anything, Mr Addison, don't worry...'
and now he's got a share in this and that,
and when it's anything he wants, he knows
a better place to get it. So he tells her,
cut a short story shorter: 'Get lost, Kelly.'
And she tells him, 'Don't leave me.' Well it's not
exactly telling him anything, just saying
'don't leave me', well, it's nothing, it's a prayer,
isn't it, if anything, 'don't leave me'.
A prayer as in unanswerable. And he says,
'If I see your face again I'll have it changed
physically, understand?' And then she's sorry,
she has to show him snapshots that a friend
took for her, she has to say, 'This proves
I love you and you love me,' and he says,
'It doesn't prove a thing,' and she simply says,

'It may be true it doesn't prove a thing, but I've copies of them in a plastic box in a local bank. *Don't leave me.*'

He says she's dead. But she's still standing there.

He tries to give her money, draws his wallet out like a trump card, like his black ace.

But money's not the same to Anything.

And of course he still knows boys, and so one night he sends the boys round, maybe that will scare her, and it does scare her. So. That was successful.

Plan A.

But Addy can't just leave her like, let's say, a bomb, which can go off if she's upset, or no one's really listening, so he thinks let's make a deal. You work for me, you keep a half of what you earn, and you shut up about us, and I don't ever have to see you.

That's their deal. She thinks

he doesn't really mean he'll never see her, so she goes along. It means she can get by.

She gets the businessmen from Maple Vale.

Table eleven know the kind of thing involved, and there's the boss's Ashtray problem sorted, they're all happy, semi-happy.

Except the boss is thinking what he needs is some insurance, something that will make her thoroughly secure, truly connected.

So the boys go round again, only this time they bring a nice thing for her, 'Hello Kelly, want to come to a party?' and she likes the nice thing they've been working on so much that she wants the thing again, 'When can we do that?' 'How are you fixed tomorrow?' then she needs it, from time to time, until that time to time is every day, and then she needs the money, because the thing burns money, because the thing burns everything,

Drugs?

though if you saw her, as I did last night,
you'd see the thing's done wonders for her figure.

Which brings us fairly up to date, unless
of course you're watching this on video,
or in another life, in some museum.
The last of the stag boys staggered home to where,
the wife or the television, or to both,
and me and Addy, we were playing the fool
outside the club, except there's only one
fool to play, and which one's playing? He says,
'Let's all go swimming,' and there's no one there
but him and me. I say, 'Let's go for a drive,'
I get him in the back, and he lies down,
and then I drive, we've done this sort of thing
enough that if he's drunk enough he'll fade,
and he's drunk enough.

I get to Bramble Park, it's 4 am
I say he's in the car, asleep. She says,
'We'll take my car as well.' 'You have a car?'
I didn't know.' 'Why would you know?' says Kelly,
'we've never had to leave before.' Then I look,
I look behind her, into the flat, and it's all
empty, all that's left is stuff
nobody takes away. 'Where's everything?'
She has this little battered Ford, she has
her life in boxes in it. It's all boxes,
so she can't see behind her.
We're out there in the car-park, and it's clear
she's had it with her life. 'I have a cousin
up north,' she's mentioned her. 'Get in your car
and follow me.' And without really thinking
I could argue this, I could ask exactly why,
I do what Ashtray says. We pull away,
I follow her. And now I know what you know,
sure, I have some trepidation, long word,
Tabitha, I'm scared of what might happen,
because I know she's angry, but a cold -

form of anger, turned cold over years,
 and somehow I've just wandered in like magic,
 to make her wish come true, but I don't know
 exactly what she's aiming for, I just –
 know that I'm, I'm somehow, for no reason
 I can speak, I'm for her, not against her,
 and on some level, well,
 being for a person also seems to
 to take away the will-power, not only
 take away the breath but take away
 the will-power.

We drive down to the beach.
 I follow her down there, it's moonless, dark,
 there's not a sign of dawn.
 I hear her car door slam, then nothing,
 then her footsteps crunching across the gravel,
 sounds like someone's army.
 She gets in, sits beside me,
 'My cousin says she'll sort me out,' says Kelly,
 'but I ain't seen her since I was thirteen.
 She better've changed. I've changed.' I say I've changed,
 and she looks at me with nothing.
 'We ought to stop at your place, get your things,'
 she says. 'Oh, get my things,'
 I say by way of answer, 'for the journey.'
 And once it's said, it's meant, I'm going with her.
 Up north! But I'm still thinking why did she ask me
 to bring him here asleep? Now she turns round
 'We mustn't wake him up,'
 says Kelly, like she's listening to my dream-life.
 She holds her hand out to me. When I take it –
 and I thought *mine* was cold – I realise
 it's the first time we've ever touched. It's brief,
 is all it is,
 but still, I felt a pull from something so –
 so far away it felt like nothing else
 had any claim on me.

We opened the back door. He didn't flinch or say a word. I put my arms around him from behind and eased him out, then Kelly took his legs and with our burden dead to all of it we stumbled down towards the beach, and we were on the sand.

I started to set him down, now we were there, but we weren't there, she said, 'Towards the water,' and chuckling almost at this madness I've pressed on, and felt the sand becoming harder, flatter, and she still gave no sign that here we were to leave him.

Then, about ten yards from where the water's fingers seemed to reach, she lowered his feet to the dark sand, and I lowered down his body.

She stood up straight. 'This is what I decided.' I nodded approvingly, but like play-acting, because this was insane. 'Do we happen to know which way the tide is turning?' I said, all innocent. 'It's coming in,' she said.

She knew. They used to come here. Her and him. 'This is what I decided.' 'He's dead to the world,' I said, I thought perhaps the facts required stating: 'He may not be in any state to save himself.' She started walking up the beach, towards the car-park and the lights of town, slowly, like it was some sunny day in August, like she had to chart a course through screaming families, and she a lady among it all serene, unworried, sorted. 'They'd blame me for it, Kelly, if some sort of harm came to him, I was his Best Man.' 'You were,' I heard her say, 'but they all know whatever he says goes, he used to like to swim on his own at dawn. Didn't you know that?'

We swam together once. Only this once he'd had too much to drink.' Now I looked back, just quickly. His arms were by his side, his face was turned towards us, he was still. How fast the tide would come I'd no idea, perhaps he'd wake up at the slightest touch of the cold sea water. Maybe. Kelly had reached the car-park, She had both hands clasped behind her neck, and was looking way beyond me when I got there.

'Don't want to go away on my own, Bailey. Need you to read my road map.' My hands were round her waist, I don't remember asking them to reach her but they had done, cupped her on both sides of Kelly's rib-cage I could feel through wool, and cotton, flesh and blood. 'I will do, now what you wanted done's been done.' Then I looked back to where, quite far away, the water rushed again, and then receded, and the small shape lay there. And it occurred to me it could cost nothing to keep moving, to fly, it looked so far away, so faint a thing when all's considered. It couldn't be that our long years together, all our times, our wild times, our good years, even his name, Addison, Addison, had anything at all to do with that crumpled length of clothing on the land's edge.

It's just, it's just that very deliberately I brought my hands away, raised my forefinger, in a kind of gesture I meant to mean: 'Whatever I do now, I'll come away with you, the thing you want is what I want, whatever I do now...' and I backed away, and turned and I set out

briskly for the sea. I filled the footsteps
 from before, and watched his body grow
 from nothing in my sight into a focus,
 an object, a monstrous object
of pity. Now the sea
 was at him, at his left side, underneath him
 a curl of salty sand like a client's arm
 assuring him, another round his ankles,
 his jacket darkening, his pale trousers
 stained while his big empty sleeping head
 did nothing. So I got him by his elbows
 and dragged him from the tide. I laid him down
 and set out for my new life. My new life...

And what do you think I saw, Sammie, Jade,
 what do you reckon, Tabitha, as I walked
 across the sand towards my new life?

I saw my new life watching me. I saw it
 turn from me and get into its car,
 I heard its engine start, I saw myself
 starting to run and shouting out its name,
 I felt myself slowed down, like paralysed
 like trying to run in dreams,
 then I saw it drive away,
 and I stopped dead in the sand,
 this morning, without it.

And I wanted to let you know that there is nothing,
 nothing after all...

(He cuts the wires attached to the 'bomb' and confetti showers out.)

left of my new life. You can relax,
 Death didn't turn up either. This is my present.
To Addy, your life,
to Miranda, his life,
 and to the rest of you, whatever lives
 you lead in your glad rags. This is a toast
 to a girl you never knew

and will never see and who I won't see again,
which is all I share with you. Please don't forget,
when you come to rub me off this video
or file away this time,
that a fine way to remember things forever
is to wish they'd never been.

(He leaves.)

(Fade to darkness.)