

ISBN City
An OUSFG Punt Party Panto Production

Offspring

N *(From offstage)* The harsh morning light stung my eyes as I floated to the surface. I was alive and I had a job to do. *(Enters wearing Bogart-style-hat, cigarette.)* They told me they needed a judge who couldn't be bought. A guy who'd tell it like it was, who'd put it straight to the jury. Who'd make sure that jury would pick the right verdict. *(Rolls and lights cigarette one-handed.)* Well, what they got was me. They didn't know it, but they had a guy who would do just what they said. That jury wasn't just gonna be told, it was gonna be shown just what the crap they were judging, the crap they were too damn lazy to actually read, was.

Let me show you the kind of material I had to work with.

(Goes up to juror, shows him book cover not visible to audience).

N Have you read-

Juror: *(Recoils in horror)* By that guy? Jesus no! I read for, you know, like, entertainment, to cheer myself up. You never met a more depressing fucking ending. Kind of like Scott of the Antarctic meets Dante's Inferno on a bad day. All hope abandoned, right. You won't catch me reading anything by *that* guy again.

N You're talking about **Titan**. Don't worry, this is quite different. *(Strikes a theatrical pose, walks to centre stage.)* Imagine you had a long-lost twin sister. *(Vampish girl flits across stage brushing him with pink scented hankie/pom-pom. He coughs.)* Ahem, better make that long-lost cousin. **Distant** cousin. *(A second girl approach him and does same.)* That's right, twin cousins. *(A third girl joins them.)* A threesome, er, triplets - Hey ladies, I'm the incorruptible critic in this town. There's nothing girls like you can offer *me* - Ooh! *(The three girls swirl seductively around him)*

Girls/chorus: [Come to our library song verse 1]

Were you thinking of work?
Don't do that, shirk!
Come down to our secret lair,
Our delights with you we'll share.

Books from Verne, Wells, timeless classics
Through techno-stuff by Clarke and such hacks
Short stories, novels, trilogies
Enough to let you take your ease

N *(Disappointed):* Oh, you mean you've got stuff to *read*? Like, a library? I thought you meant...

They drag him off, struggling.

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In the Dark

Man: I was wandering through the crumbling, Byzantine stone alleys of the old city. Deep in my own thoughts, I remained unaware of the dirty street urchins around me: I was too busy watching the rain evaporate from the tarmac like promises from a cut-price whore.

Urchins: Any aether to spare, mister?

Man: Life fades fast in that part of town. They start on the aether young and go downhill from there. Still, what can you do? I can't look out for every piece of motherless street trash in the place, just to stem my guilt. I performed a cheap illusion and moved on.

As I walked into the gathering gloom, the neighbourhood went from bad to downright ugly. The façades of the buildings were falling apart like cheap alabaster. Everywhere I looked, there were signs of corruption bubbling just below the surface.

At last, I made it to the bridge. She was there. She said something snappy; something womany. I didn't pay attention at first - I never listen to dames. But this one cut right through my brooding thoughts. Whatever she was after, she needed it bad.

Man *(to Broad):* What are you, some kind of fairy or some-ut?

Broad: *(in a high-pitched, very camp voice):* Yes.

Man *(to audience):* Why did I say that? I was so bitter and annoyed that I could say anything at this point. This woman was the key to my past, and maybe also to the future, and yet what did I have to say other than ask if she's a fairy?

Broad: The question of my sexuality is irrelevant to this story. Don't get confused by a cheap joke.

Man: I decided to try and move things along - with stupid broads like this one you can get stuck on the chit-chat all day long.

Broad: Who are you calling a broad?

Man *(to Broad):* I came for information, not random comment, woman!

Broad: Ooh, aren't you a cheeky one! Well, I'll tell you one thing for free. What's done is done, and though your dreams are full of alternatives and your heart overflows with regrets, the past cannot be changed. You are and always will be what your history makes you. Just like me.

Man: The woman was quite clearly mad. Why had I come to her for advice? What was I hoping to achieve?

But something in her words struck an off-key chord in my heart. However hard I tried to damp it, a realisation was building, and it wasn't pretty. Somehow, I'd turned into the thing I'd always hated the most: a vile, disgusting, filthy, exploitative, whore-mongering politician. If this town was rotten, then I was a spore at the source of it all. How had it all gone so wrong?

The Girl in Question

The scene is set in a large, well-maintained room. The most prominent piece of furniture is a large, ornate screen, behind which we cannot see. Our narrator is sat on chair facing the screen. Mrs. C. speaks from behind the screen.

Artist: I was here on a job; not your normal kind of job. The dame behind the screen wanted a portrait done – but she was eyeball-shy.

Mrs. C. (*contemplative*): My father was a flaky kind of character.

Artist: The dame surely wore high heels - I could hear it in her voice.

Mrs. C. (*with an air of regret*): The most profound revelation of my father's life was this: two identical snowflakes, pinned side-by-side on the midnight velvet.

Artist: That's when I realised my image was wrong. She was a blonde. They're always blonde, the ones who hurt...

Mrs. C.: He told me how much he liked my hair... Strange, when he hadn't ever seen it...

Artist: I was making no headway. The image was shifting and changing like the reflection of a pimp in a puddle of tears. Was she referring to her father, or some black-hearted lover? Desperate, I grasped at one of the oldest tricks in the book...

Artist (*to screen*): Surely, when he saw your vivid blue eyes, his heart melted from the passion held within them?

Mrs. C.: I have survived a life of exploitation and solipsism. Unlike my mother, I did not succumb to the Big Bad Wolf. You'll not catch me out with so cheap a ploy.

Artist (*as narrator*): The dame was smart – smarter than any dame I'd seen before. Not that I'd seen her. She was still behind the screen. And that was where she stayed for the whole of our meeting...

Change of scene. The artist is walking down a dark road. Various shady characters (including the chorus of prostitutes) perform nefarious deeds in the background.

Artist: The night was black.

Chorus: Black as what?

P1: Black as my eyes?

P2: Black as my knickers?

P3: Black as the book in which my deeds are written down?

Artist: The night was as black as the heart of a paedophile priest in the moment he despairs of his sins. Despite my long experience, I shivered at the atmosphere in those mean streets. It was as though the very town was rotten down to its core.

P1: Not all the way down. There is a perfect seed of truth at the heart of every story.

P4 is standing on a corner, away from the other girls. The artist approaches.

Artist: The dame on the corner was dressed to provoke – showing off her wares. (*Walks slowly past prostitute, obviously tempted.*) She had the reddest eyes I'd ever seen. And the reddest cheeks. And it was dripping on the floor. Something wasn't right here.

P4 collapses, blood spurting from her eyes. The artist walks on past.

The House Always Wins

Chorus: Dick was kicking back, letting himself get hypnotised by the ceiling fan; bands of dust, light coming through the bars.

Dick: Hypnotised my arse, the mechanical pattern helps me think! So that's what I was doing, thinking. It was getting easy, too; the number of thumps between each move of my brain was getting smaller. Soon I was going ___: Inferences skipping like stones ___, keeping up with the whoosh, whoosh of the fan. Some people have Jesus as their benchmark, I have my fan. Hey whatever keeps you going...

Like I said, I was just pushing up the pace when the silhouette pushed up against the glass of my door. I could see the page-boy and the poise and thought ... blonde. Only a blonde would be game to move with body language like that.

Blonde: I was going to back out, but I was standing right in front of his door. Unless he was asleep, he couldn't have missed me. He called me in before I had a chance to knock.

Dick: So I called her in before she had a chance to knock. Blonde, alright- in a white mini-dress with white patent leather shoes. If I could get this broad to take a stroll with me in the sunshine, I'd be able to use those shoes to get a gander up that dress. "Great shoes," I said.

Blonde: Thanks, but I'm not here about my shoes.

Dick: You're here about...?

Blonde: I need you to help me.

Dick: With what?

Blonde: I'm being followed.

Dick: Maybe you should be followed.

Blonde: Cute; but I'm not.

Dick: You're sure you're being followed?

Blonde: Yes.

Dick: Certain?

Blonde: Yes.

Dick: Convince me.

Scene cuts to sleazy bar. Scantily-attired females dance in the background. Manly men drink manly drinks in a manly fashion.

Blonde: It started at Joe's bar, about a week ago. Joe was polishing glasses.

Joe: I was polishing glasses when she walked in. That's all I remember. Honest. Hey, I run a straight business here, no funny stuff, straight up the line. People's business is their business. Like I said, that's all I remember. If you don't mind, I got work to do.

Blonde: Everyone looked at me when I walked in, but no one would make eye contact. I felt like I was the only one not in on the joke, y'know? So I walked over to the pool table where Chalky Dave was cuing some trick shots. You know, the sort where the white ball jumps over the others? Chalky was real good with them. Anyhow, **he** won't look me in the eye, either. He looked scared. He blew his shot and his hands were shaking.

Dave: So I blew my shot, so what? By my hands weren't shaking; they never shake. They. Never. Shake. And I wasn't scared neither.

Blonde: Like I said, Chalky's hands were shaking and I could see he was scared; scared stiff. I was about to ask him what was up when he looked over my shoulder and froze. I mean the blood just drained from his face. He didn't move. I was about to turn around when I realised the whole place had gone dead quiet. In Chalky's eyes and on every ball on the table I could see the same reflection.

Dick: Reflection of what?

Blonde: The reflection of the man standing just behind me. I tell you, you coulda heard a pin drop, and I was scared stiff. This guy lights a cigarette with a gold lighter and turns around and walks out. I can see this in the pool balls and Dave's eyes, but I'm too scared to turn around.

Dick: So how does thinking that you saw someone in a few reflecting cue balls mean you're being followed?

Blonde: I didn't imagine any of it! I'm not crazy! Besides, there's more.

Dick: More?

Blonde: More. The same thing happened at my home?

Dick: Your home?

Blonde: On the phone.

Dick: The phone?

Blonde: Yes, the phone. Everyone I knew was scared and evasive. Even my mother.

Blonde: Mum, what's wrong?

Blonde's mother (*sounding scared*): There's nothing wrong, daughter.

Blonde: And the phone would ring but no one would speak: "Hello?" "Hello?" "Is there anybody there?" "Is there anybody there?" "Who is this?" "Who are you?" "Hello?" ... Plus, there's e-mails.

Dick: E-mails?

Blonde: Yes, e-mails.

Computer: On. Ready. Please verify identity. Access granted.

Blonde: I had e-mails from myself to myself that I'd never sent.
Dick: What did they say?
Blonde: Some of them told me to come and see you.
Dick: And the others?
Blonde: They told me **not** to come and see you.
Dick: Are you saying that someone has cracked your e-mail client and is spoofing you?
Blonde: I don't know. All I know is that you figure into this somewhere; that's why I'm here.

Dick pulls out a gold lighter and lights up.

Dick: What did they say?

Blonde: What did who say?

Dick: The e-mails.

Blonde: You just asked me that.

Dick: Don't contact me.

Blonde: What?

Dick: What?

Blonde: Don't contact me.

Dick, Blonde and Mother: There's nothing wrong, daughter. Hello? Is anybody there? Who is this?
Who are you?

Computer, Dick, Blonde,
Mother, Joe and Chalky: On. Ready. Please verify identity. Please verify identity. Access granted.

Supersymmetry

N: A deep velvet night sky bathes the narrow streets with a soft red palette. The clean shop facades sheen large reflective spotlights on soulless dark shapes; interfering patterns of dark and light scatter on the wet cobbled sidewalks in an already dark and dank night.

An anonymous cloaked figure shifts uneasily under an anonymous doorway. A hand silently raises an unearthly drag to his pale lips. Short smoky breath casts shadow snakes on an already shadowy man. Fear, uncertainty and doubt surrender to the devilish eye of smouldering embers. Twin reflections glimmer briefly across the street amongst the black shapes; two tiny reflections in a mirror that wasn't there. The shadowy figure inches sideways; the opulent reflections seem to shimmer.

The Man looks scared.

Man: I look scared.

Man: I can see the same reflection in the eyes of a pilot high on danger, so confident of a clean kill his focus never wavers. He's cool as ice and flies those jet black whisper vipers that come from nowhere. No warning, nothing until it's too late. He definitely has the look of a predator. His eyes are framed by features uncannily like my own father. Could he be part of the family freak streak? Will I ever find my brother?

N: The shadowy figure seemingly manages to breath life from the smallest remnants of a drag and looks up to the lightning sky. The twin reflections in the blackness actually glow brighter. The Man does a double take.

Man: Is he my brother or is he me?

Are You Now or Have You Ever Been

A sleazy bar, girls dance around poles in the background, manly men drink manly drinks (litre steins of beer, whisky, etc.) but N is drinking water.

N's duplicate steps out of himself, walks towards the audience and addresses them directly:

N I'd woken up in a bar - again. I knew I'd got there in some kind of vehicle. But was it an ambulance? A fighter plane? Did the journey involve one of those topless (pauses) topless buses they take tourists round town in? My memory was just a blank.

I had some vague memory of sleeping with my identical twin brother's wife. Or was it my brother's wife's identical twin? Do I have a brother? Do I have a wife? Who was the old guy with the cigar? Why did he keep making V-signs at me, and what was with the cigar and the bowler?

(Shakes head) I'd drunk so much last night that I'd reached the last page. I don't think anyone had a clue what was happening any more. *(Clutches head.)* But I know there was something I had to do. Something involving five books. I'd been described as the finest critical mind in a generation. Of fandom. But I still didn't know what to do.

Vampish girl tiptoes up behind him, holding the books. He jumps when she speaks in sympathetic tones.

VG I can give you a hint here. It's something I got from my tutor.

N *(Hopefully, looking up from her scantily clad body to her face.)* Hey – you're an English student?

VG Chemistry, actually. But it doesn't matter. Literature, exam papers, whatever, what you do is this. *(Beckons him on.)* We climb up to the top of the stairs...
(They climb.)

N And throw ourselves down them?

VG No, silly. You stand with your back to the stairs, and throw the books backwards over your shoulder. Go on.

Hesitatingly at first, then with increasing confidence, N throws the five books. VG steps down and picks them up in the order she reaches them, saying:

VG First prize, second, third, gentleman's fourth, and FAIL.

N looks stunned, then relieved, and comes forward to take VG's arm with grateful expression. All actors come to the front and take final bow.

ALL CHORUS:

The one thing you learn at Oxford is:

Just because they're on a reading list, there's no need to read the bloody things!

Not Fade Away

Private dick, successful critic
Thought to himself oops I've got a lot of firearms
I'm caught in a gun fight terminally
Semi professional critic but his heart's not in it
He's paying the price of living life at the limit
Caught up in the centuries anxiety
It preys on him, he's getting thin

He lives in a crackhouse, an innercity crackhouse in the country
Watching Angel DVDs and the food he eats in the country
Reads a book by Matthew Ruff, feeds Frodo to a wolf in the country
It's like an animal farm, lots of rural charm in the country

In the country, in the country...

Blow, blow me up with a grenade inside a head.
Blow, blow me up with a grenade inside a head.

He's killed a whore his
life's a different story
Everything going bullet-ballet, in touch with his own mortality
He's reading Baxter, knocking back water
It's a helping hand that makes you feel wonderfully bland
Is this The Separation anxiety?
If faint at heart, paint imaginary tarts.

He lives in a crackhouse, an innercity crackhouse in the country
He's got a bullet in his chest so he needs a lot of rest in the country
He drinks smoke kills, has visceral thrills in the country
Says she's come to some harm on an animal farm in the country