

The Real Story

by Kate Clanchy

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To be honest, Giles, I'd like a little more credit and a little less blame. I'd like you, and the directors, and actually, the *whole firm* of Burns Pope Wilde, Literary Agents, to remember how and where this whole story started.

And that's in the slush pile, with me. No, I'm not complaining. I know it's where we all get our start! I'd just like you to recognise, I wasn't so much *in* it, as *on* it. I was sniffing it all over: yup, all of it, the lousy dog memoirs, the saddo comic novels, the picture books by perverts. I was using my nose the way a metal detector uses his bleeper in a prehistoric midden. My nose sniffed out the hand-bound, hand-sewn, loony booklet of *poems*. My nose said, Susannah, hold that one to the light.

Oh, I admit at first I thought I was looking at the world's best quill pen font. I was peering at the capitalisation, trying to spot the repeats, when I noticed that I was also *reading* the poems. Maybe this guy Ellis Bell actually had something. The

landscape, you know? All that death and snow and so forth? I was thinking: teen Goth; Deep Green; Northern Soul - kinda Now. And then my nose was twitch, twitch, twitching, and I was reaching for my phone.

Of course there wasn't a number, not even a landline. And that's what I mean. Credit me, Giles: I didn't drop the case, I went there. I was on the train to Leeds before I noticed there wasn't a postcode.

Leeds was one thing, you can still shop; Hebden Bridge, also in the Starbucks Belt, nice interiors shops, you'd be surprised - but that place, H_____? What can I tell you? It was off the map. It was off the Sat Nav. Literally: the Tom-Tom screen went blank. 'Them's the Pixels' said the taxi driver, drawing up in the lay-by, waving at a bit of moor. 'We don't go there any more. Not since what happened to Edgar.'

I got out of the car. You know that noise when you're in the country? Those waves in your ears echoing, fading out? Like you've just been unplugged. Well, it gets on my nerves, to be honest, and I didn't know what to do. I'd come so far. I could see a road, though: grey dirt snaking through the grass. 'It's down there, you reckon?' I asked the driver, but he was gone.

Well, I panicked, a bit, obviously. I tried my iPhone: no dice. That place was on - would you call

it a lay-line? Like no reception at all? Total cut off? On the metalled road, you could get anything; I was speaker-camming Cara, getting her to double check the name on an antique Ordnance Survey. Two steps off it, a total blank. Even my compass utility wouldn't work. I thought about it carefully: I could hike back into Reception, call a cab, or I could walk down that road, into the Beyond. And I took Beyond, and I'd like you guys to ask yourselves, honestly, if you'd have done the same? Really? For a book of *poems*?

I'm not much of an outdoor girl, but I remembered it's important to keep hydrated, especially in extreme conditions, so after a mile or so, I stopped and broke out the San Pellegrino. I was in a *dell*, I guess. Sort of a dip, in a sunny bit? There was a stream running down a cliff, maybe six foot high, then it broadened out into a nice sort of brook affair. I mean, I suppose the water had to be polluted - it did foam on the waterfall - but it was clear in the stream. Brown and clear, like beer. So, if you can believe it, I took off my Conversees, rolled up my skinnies, waded out to a nice flat stone in the middle, and sat there, cooling my ankles in the flowing Newcastle Brown. I even got out my aviators, popped them on. It all looked better like that, in sepia. More natural.

The water burped and bubbled, and I guess there are birds that sort of gurgle, too, but I know a

laugh when I hear one. Something flicked in at the corner of my eye, something white, and I heard it again: a chilly, uppity, intellectually superior, snorty sort of giggle. I took off my glasses and I couldn't see anything. I put them on, and there she was, on the opposite rock. A five foot figure in a Laura Ashley nightie, crouched on her haunches. Thick dark hair and a grey little goblin face with bushy eyebrows and this horrid, horrid, *quizzical* expression. Like what the fuck, townie, at me and my sunnies.

Well, I didn't run away. (Point for that please!) I said, 'Hi, I'm looking for Ellis Bell?'

'Ellis Bell,' she said, grinning.

'Yes,' I said. 'You see, he sent me some poems -'

'He sent poems!'

'And I've come all the way from London to see about them.'

'From London, to see about them!' she said, and, let me tell you, I had by this time noticed the repeating trick and was just a teensy bit off-put.

'Do you know Ellis Bell's address?' I said, and she stood up on her rock. You could see how thin she was through her nightie thing: muscley little monkey legs, and a horrible dark triangle at the crotch that I'm fairly sure was not a thong. Her feet were bare, gripping the rock like a hobbit.

'Ellis Bell's address,' she said, pointing down the road. I stood on my rock, followed the line of her arm. I saw a square grey house squatting Psycho-like on the horizon.

'There?' I said, quailing.

'Air,' she said, and when I turned, she wasn't there. And yeah, you could write it up as performance art, you can say she's super shy, and she's a fucking genius, but at the time, I was just spooked. Spooked and little pissed off. I pulled my feet up onto the rock and started to dry them with my socks, and a little flat cloud went across the sun and turned the beauty off like a switch.

'You look like a drain,' I said to the stream, and it giggled at me, smugly. It had those nasty little reeds in it, with like, dirty cotton buds in the tops of them? I'd just noticed them. It took forever to get my socks on, and when I stood up, I couldn't see my way back, only forward, to the grey house, and still the wind blowing through the grass like I was locked in a Wyeth Family landscape.

'Air, Air,' said a voice in my ear, and yeah, I got the fear. I split my Converse on that path. I lost my sunnies. I ran for the Psycho-house; the black door and the great brass knocker coming into focus like a lifebelt. I battered that door. I hung on to that knocker even when the door opened.

And who opened it? Not a corpse, which I was honestly by that time expecting. Not her

nightyness, thank fuck, which had also crossed my mind. More Laura Ashley vintage weirdness, though. What I think about *that* is: it's a look, but it's actually quite a demanding one? You need a bit of height, shoulders, cheekbones, and *definitely* the daily Timotei, to carry it off, and the lady in front of me had none of these things. Her head came up, no kidding, to my bra, and her hair was like, *embalmed* into a bun. But at least she smiled at me. Clever grey eyes in a pale little face. She said 'Good day?'

'I'm looking for Ellis Bell,' I said, and she actually clapped.

'You're from the agency!' she said. 'Thank God.'

So there you are, you see. Next time you get started on the 'Susannah got off on the wrong foot with Charlotte' crap (No, you *do*. I've heard you at it), I'd like you to remember that little scene Tiny, tough white hands, button cuffs, clapping. *Charlotte* clapping.

And what did I do next? Well, lots, actually. Lots of smiling. Lots of chatting. I coped fantastically, I'd say, considering I'd run over a moor and been scared half-witless by a lunatic. I was right in there, going gosh, gosh, what a super place, is that real limewash, I love the distressed look on the walls, is it genuine lamp-black? How do you do Anne, no of course I understand that some

people don't talk and prefer to sit by the fire and gibber. Gibbering is my favourite thing too!

Look, I sat right down in their lunatic low-carbon co-op kitchen. I said, super, a real stove! I did not say, omigod, who poured a pan of grease down your weird little sofa and what is that heap of dung on a plate, I sat on the fucker and ate the flaming rock cake. When they pointed at the parlour door and went 'shh shh', I shushed, like it was really super-normal to be scared stiff of your Dad when you're thirty-two. I whispered: and do you write yourself, Charlotte? Poems! Lovely! And Belgium, what a super theme! Could I have a look? Might I take it back to London with me, Charlotte? Oh super Charlotte, and I'll definitely hire a flaming horse or pigeon or some other fucker to get back to you and let you know what I think of your sweaty recollections of your boarding school teacher. A fine start with Charlotte. Do you take my point?

Anyway, what was *your* start with Charlotte? I showed you *Professor*. You agreed with me, change the gender, put in a hunky doctor, add, like, a dead nun, and try for the Twilight mum's market. You didn't say, put her on a retainer, cos otherwise she'll skip off to Hills Wilton with our sage advice in her pocket and that book'll win the Orange Prize and be on Richard and Judy too and keep us and one of our better publishers in funds for the next

millennium. Or did you? Well, maybe I just didn't hear it.

The next bit, I admit, I didn't do so well. But I was set up. Picture this, okay? No, *feel* this. Put yourself in my ripped Converse, nibble the disgusting rock cakes. You're just about calming down, just about to say to Anne, who has come to sit beside you and is gently and a little spookily fingering your sweatshirt and murmuring about a hard life and something she's been writing and you're just thinking, wow, do we have an abuse memoir here? - when the kitchen door opens and in comes the Goblin of the Moor. You'd scream, right?

Well, I didn't. I just said 'Woo!' Not, *you scared the fuck out of me*. Or, *don't you think you should wear underwear with cheesecloth?* Just, like: *Woo!*

'Woo who!' she said, 'Woo who London!' And she started to dance round the room – like a mime you know? She picked up this rock cake and made like it was a phone, waving it about. 'Reception, reception?' And I'm thinking, I get the feeling you're Ellis Bell, baby, and I'm losing faith in your *oeuvre*, big time. No, that's honest, and I stand by it. You see, when I go looking for writers, I'm looking for the package, not a screwball. You know? I want warm, handsome, presentable, telly friendly, non-abusive... I want Patrick Gale. Every time.

Oh really? Well maybe it's a generational thing. Twenty years is long time in this business, Giles, and like the internet happened and all the old drunk pervy guys are dead and... Yes, I agree. This isn't getting us anywhere. Quite. Let's leave it there.

Where was I? Oh yes. Watching the Goblin dancing. Well, Charlotte gets embarrassed and she says -

'Susannah is an Agent, Emily. All the way from London.'

'An Agent of the Devil?' says Emily, still dancing.

'A Literary Agent,' hisses Charlotte. 'Susannah, this is Ellis Bell.'

'I figured.' I said, 'We actually met.'

Emily flops into an arm chair, stares at me, starts picking at her rock cake.

'A literary agent,' she says, 'And what is the book which sets your heart beating, Susannah? What is the literature that raises your doggish hackles?' And she did a little dog mime, woof, woof...

'Well,' I say, very politely, 'I was awfully interested in Ellis Bell and his poems.'

Emily waves the cake about her head. 'Do you want to bite them?' she says. 'Do they inflame you?' and, no kidding, she runs her hand down her nightie in this really inappropriately sexy way. Anne

has her head in her little hands. Charlotte, though, is grinning.

Now, that is the point I fucked up. I know it. If I'd given a different answer, right then, I could have left with the ms of *Wuthering* in my satchel. I'm sure of it. Cos of course Emily's interested in money and fame, really. A certain sort of fame. I think we've seen enough since the Booker to confirm that for us. Oh come on: the *whole* of the Observer mag? The photo shoot on the moor? The collaboration with flaming *All Saints*? Do you really call that Art? Ok. You do. Art. Should have mentioned it, shouldn't I. Susannah should have said 'Yes, the poems inflame my heart with the truth of Great Art and make me sweat and salivate' but, as it happens, I didn't. I looked at the sneering goblin – yeah, she photographs nicely, but have you noticed, always in profile, mouth shut? No teeth, you heard it here first, – and I said:

'No. But I think you have a great font. Ever thought of developing an app?'

Well, I was out before you could say Man Booker. She sort of clawed me, if you really want to know. And I squealed, and Charlotte and Anne went into this mime of terror cos of the noise, and Daddy and the Door, and – well, I just left. Closed the big black door. Outside, it had clouded over big time. In fact, there was a fog descending, thickest fog I've ever seen, wraiths of it, like dozens of

Emilys in hundreds of nighties. I had another go at my compass utility.

Go on then, Giles, rage. Picture the Man Booker pouring through my hands like the fog. And then get over it, please. Because, if you ask me, Emily was looking at self-publishing from the start. She was already self-binding! I think she might even have already hiked over to Hebden before I visited. Hooked up with Claire at CliffTop Books. She was so damn quick off the mark, after all, wasn't she? Had it out a month after *Tenant*?

Alright. I can understand you don't want to accept that. But here's another thought for you: maybe, just maybe, WH isn't really all the eternal masterpiece we're all making out? Maybe it's just a small press novel that got really, really, lucky? You know, warm wind from Twilight, warmer one from Charlotte, the public in a hot mood for incest, judges all favouring the small presses, Green stuff ensuring the good reviews? In a way, WH is very *fashionable* you know? I mean, not as in iPhone, fashionable as in *The New Portentiousness*? Like we live in the urban world and we all feel guilty as fuck so all we want to read about is like moors and stones and pure feelings and all that tosh? And give it the flaming Booker.

Okay, okay, a bit sour. Yup. We'll end it there. But I do want to leave you with this about Charlotte, at least. You've got to understand, Giles, she was

always looking beyond the Pixels. She wanted to be where the big shit happened. Look how quickly she'd moved up here. Moving through us was just a part of that: it really was not my fault. Besides, she has a thing for men. The way she fastened on to James at Hills Wilton is actually sort of scary. She wouldn't get Jane E out of her pocket for us, would she? But James just had to dimple, and whoopy-doopy, she reaches in her nasty little hand-sewn under-skirt pocket, and out comes the teen crossover classic. That relationship is *way* over-personal. Honestly. His wife's in fits, and there's nothing she can do, cos it's Charlotte pays the bills. Yup, that's Charlotte. Miss Nicey-Nicey with her rock cakes and her big grey eyes looking over my shoulder.

But I'm sounding bitter. Bitter is not good. Bitter is not my theme of the day. I'm here to accentuate the positive. What I need you, and the firm, to concentrate on now is Anne, and the future. Anne, bless her! It's no exaggeration to say I owe her my life. I was already half a mile off the path when she popped up beside me and took my arm. I was just yards from the boggy bit where Edgar the taxi-driver drowned. I could have been a Seamus Heaney poem, easy as a splish, splash, splosh. As it was, she walked me right out of the Pixels, waited till the cab came, talked me through the whole story.

I gave her my iPhone, she gave me *Tenant*, that day. A nice day's shopping, in any other context. No, come on. *Tenant* got a major Betty Trask. Its sales are more than adequate. And she's segue-ed into self-help just seamlessly. AA America is really interested in a tour. And it's Anne, let me remind you, who brought us this. The ms I've got on my desk right now. The one I really want some help with, Giles.

Hot? Giles, it's glowing. It's a rag-to-riches misery memoir that's going to be huge in the states, *plus* a parenting how-to book to out-sell Baby Mozart. How a boy from an incredibly humble background in Ireland escaped poverty, abuse, and illiteracy to rub shoulders with the careless rich and excitingly pervy in Cambridge University. How he won and lost the love of his life. How he settled in the wilds of North Yorkshire and entered into a unique family experiment. How he raised not one, not two, not three, but four authentic geniuses! (Yup, we are counting Bramwell. Tattoos were only ever a sideline. He's really in demand in Thrash Metal CD covers now. And he's cleaned up. Might even go with Anne on the tour.) Anyway. Just picture it. This is what we're all going to be reading this Christmas. I'm seeing monochrome cover, red indent lettering:

Patrick Brunty: My Story
And a subtitle

Genius! How you can raise one too!

Because, in the end, Giles, isn't that what we all want to know? Not, I mean, not the high-falutin' stuff. The Emily Romance. The Charlotte Art. No, the real stuff. The stuff we can apply to our actual lives. That's what Anne's got, and Patrick too, once you get past his super-scary nine-foot tall mad-Irish persona. He's the centre of the action remember, up in that house. His was the door that was closed, and now Burns Pope Wilde can open it! I'm seeing serial here Giles, I'm seeing spin-offs, I'm seeing chat-show, I'm seeing Oprah. Trust me Giles, it may have taken a few years to get here, but *this* is the real story.

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