

LARA PAWSON

This Is the Place to Be

Beditions

For you, J, of course

First published in the UK in 2016
by CB editions
146 Percy Road London W12 9QL
www.cbEditions.com

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Printed in England by T. J. International Ltd, Padstow

ISBN 978-1-909585-21-8

Freaks are called freaks and are treated as they are treated – in the main, abominably – because they are human beings who cause to echo, deep within us, our most profound terrors and desires.

Most of us, however, do not appear to be freaks – though we are rarely what we appear to be. We are, for the most part, visibly male or female, our social roles defined by our sexual equipment.

But we are all androgynous, not only because we are all born of a woman impregnated by the seed of a man but because each of us, helplessly and forever, contains the other – male in female, female in male, white in black and black in white. We are a part of each other. Many of my countrymen appear to find this fact exceedingly inconvenient and even unfair, and so, very often, do I. But none of us can do anything about it.

– James Baldwin, 'Freaks and the American Ideal of Manhood' (*Playboy*, January 1985)

When I was about seven the owner of a watch and clock shop mistook me for a boy. Twenty-four years later, a Nigerian man, following my radio reports from Angola, mistook me for a Nigerian. Omolara was what he called me.

When I had short hair I was regularly mistaken for Jamie Lee Curtis. In London, I've been followed by people with cameras. While visiting the Alhambra last year, a North American man pretended to take photographs of the Patio de los Leones but he was actually snapping me. I heard him whisper to his wife and I felt her eyes run over me. Once, when I was on a blind date, the owner of a restaurant in Soho invited me to sign the actress's account.

I've also been marched out of Primark for entering the women's changing room. One afternoon in Islington a group of men with shaved heads ran up the street shouting, Fucking trannie! One of them had a baseball bat. I remember looking around for the transvestite. Then I realised she was me.

Not long afterwards, I took the decision to grow my hair, a weakness that still shames me.

Today, some people call me Crofty. But there's an elderly man on my street – he's rebuilding a Morris Mini-Minor from scratch – well, he calls me Tomb Raider.

I have owned three tortoises. One of them could walk a mile in a weekend. His name was Maud. I also had a mouse called Charlotte, renamed Charlie when we noticed her testicles. Shortly after that, my brother's mouse produced lots of babies. They were so small and slender they could slip between the bars of the cage. For weeks, my mum kept finding squashed white mice beneath the fridge.

When I was living in Luanda I owned a Siamese cat. Fanny had been abandoned by her owners so I referred to her as an IDC – an internally displaced cat – as opposed to an IDP – an internally displaced person, which is United Nations-speak for people who are refugees inside their own country.

One day, Fanny gave birth to two kittens on my laptop. I was supposed to be filing a report to the BBC, but because of Fanny's labour I ended up filing the story an hour late. I wish I could remember what my news report was about that day. I wish I could remember how important it was.

During dinner with a crowd of aid workers, a British diplomat offered to adopt Fanny's kittens. He called one of them Madiba after Nelson Mandela. Among Europeans

living in southern Africa, Madiba is – or certainly was – a popular pet's name. I met a foreign correspondent who had a pair of dogs: one called Madiba, the other called Graça after Graça Machel, Mandela's third wife. Or widow, as she is now.

I currently own two cats. They're called Lena and Salomão after the couple who looked after me in Luanda. I miss the real Lena and Salomão a lot. Sometimes I think the cats have become a bit like the people, but I don't trust that thought.

Memories creep up on me when I'm out walking. There's a lump of marble at the bottom of Coppermill Lane. There used to be a metal sculpture on top of it, made by local schoolchildren. But the sculpture was stolen, so the marble stands empty, a resting place on which to sit and stare. It looks like the trunk of a tree. Sawn-off and naked. I don't always notice it, but when I do I remember the soldier from M'banza Kongo.

We heard a gunshot. We ran with the crowds. There he was, on the stump of a tree. Sitting and staring. A rifle at his feet. His brains blown out through the back of his head.

To reach the marshes, I have to go down Coppermill battling away twists of insects which look like funnels of smoke spiralling skywards. To the north, reservoir number five is surrounded by a concrete palisade. Birders

come here, pointing their binoculars towards the pair of islands in the centre of the water, to what is said to be one of the largest heron breeding sites in the UK. Grey herons, greylag geese, great-crested grebes, wagtails, wheatears, waders, the odd fisherman, the occasional fox.

I like the cormorants most. Large and conspicuous water-birds, say the experts. I'd add the word haunting.

Sometimes, when I look through the gaps in the fence I can see the Cabinda swamps, the silhouettes of broken trees stretching north towards Congo. Another military checkpoint. A peak in anxiety because of my presence. My government minder hiding my notebook and recording equipment inside his jacket. I hear him mutter something about safety, then a reassurance: It's all right, don't look worried, they won't check me. He looks terrified.

I'd been in Angola just a few months and was already questioning what I was doing. How to report the nine-year-old boy who'd lost his legs after standing on a landmine? His parents dead, his siblings vanished, no aunts or uncles. The nurse said she was worried. He hadn't uttered a word since he was found by farmers a week earlier. I can still see the grey blanket on his hospital bed, the solemn quality of his face, the red water container beside his bed.

Two doctors from Vietnam were working around the clock, tidying up blasted bone, sewing up stumps and flesh and, No, Lara, they don't want to be interviewed.

I remember, back then, thinking about the first time I saw my parents cry. My mum was sitting at the wheel of the car outside our house in south-west London. My brother, my sister and I sat in the back, not knowing what to do. Perhaps my sister tried to comfort her. A quarter of a century later, my mum cried again, a few months after I'd written a letter about abortion to a national newspaper. I was in my twenties and was angry about a certain silence surrounding the subject, and the idea that women should either be shamed or celebrated for exercising this right. I felt no shame, but nor did I seek to celebrate what I'd done. I think I said this in my letter, which ended up as the lead beneath the headline, My sense of loss after abortion.

The first time I saw my father cry was when his mother died. I think I was ten. He cried again, a decade later, when a horse flipped on top of me, fracturing my pelvis in three places. In the hospital, in A&E, I remember lying on the stretcher, my dad, a doctor, standing beside me, becoming more and more upset. I was waiting to be X-rayed. He could see the excruciating pain I was in.

It was unusual to see tears in Angola. I think that was one of the things that surprised me about the war. I rarely saw anyone cry.