

# Days and Nights in W12

Jack Robinson

‘My work as a reporter has taught me that logical stories, without riddles and holes in them, in which everything is obvious, tend to be untrue.’ – HANNA KRALL



ABC

Midnight. A stranger is at the door. She tells you she needs money for the bus fare down to Exeter, where her father is dying of liver cancer, and she hasn't seen him for six years and the fare is £25.50 and the bus leaves at 3.30 a.m. and earlier today she was mugged in the park, and you know that if you don't interrupt her all the awful details are just going to go on piling up. Do you give her the benefit of the doubt? Equally, when you press the buzzer yourself and a voice through the intercom – the voice of someone who has been interrupted in an afternoon nap or a game of chess or an argument about who puts out the rubbish or an idyllic bout of love-making – tells you the person you want has gone away to Wales: to believe or not to believe? Do you need evidence before you decide? For some of these stories – for example, those of Sri Aurobindi (page 9) or Juliet Herbert (page 41) – I can quote chapter and verse from other sources; for others, there's only what's here in black and white.

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## A&E

The waiting time in A&E this afternoon is three hours and thirty minutes. And truly, no one here looks as if they are about to die *right now*, or even in the next half hour; it feels more as if their flight has been delayed. When you look more closely you see that that woman's head is tilted at a strange angle, and that man's left ankle seems swollen, much bigger than his other one, but none of us is perfect and these flaws could simply be part of who they are, although of course God knows what's going on beneath the surface. Every twenty minutes or so a nurse comes to the edge of the room and calls out a name, giving it an upward inflection at the end, unsure of her pronunciation, unsure such a person even exists. A child mewls. The drinking fountain is out of order. A silent TV screen shows a continuous loop of advice – drink responsibly, recycle, save water – though it may be too late for all that now. After around an hour you are learning how to wait, and beginning to accept that hurt, pain, error and the need for help are not accidents or emergencies at all.



## ALLOTMENT

A woman lives in this allotment shed. She mixes her tobacco with the dried leaves of a plant she grows here, and she drinks vodka in which the leaves of some other plant have been infused. She wears many layers of clothes and the colour of her eyes changes: green when she laughs, red when she's angry, yellow when sad, a kind of deep purple when her memory is playing tricks. So many different colours and shades. She has friends who sit with her and talk, and sometimes in winter, when the allotments are untended and there may be snow on the ground, I take a vodka contribution and join them. Often I end up staying the whole night: when her eyes are blue or green the hours pass quickly, and no one wants to leave her alone when they're yellow.



APE

The DNA of this ape is 99 per cent identical with my own. He follows me, or I him; I glance into a shop window and he's there. Sometimes he opens his great foul-smelling mouth and cries out, 'a cry that was no more than a breath'. Mistah Kurtz – he not dead yet.



AUSTIN A35

Given that losing and forgetting are most of what we do, the appearance of this Austin A35 in a multi-storey car park like a dollop of thick grey custard is an act of comic revenge. In the 1950s we – my mother, my brother, myself – were encapsulated in this car for many thousands of miles; at picturesque spots or for family reunions we stepped out and took black-and-white photos of each other with our Kodak Brownie camera. I open the unlocked door and sit behind the wheel but the wind has been through it – there is nothing, not even a whiff of those journeys: the boredom, bickering, silences, the close-quarters intensity of other people's moods, the desperate holding on until we can stop to pee by the roadside. Just some hairs on the back seat that may be dog hairs. Children grow up in such boxed, cramped spaces, between one place and another.



## BAKERY

It was raining and David's wife asked if he could give her a lift down to the Tube station. He was busy, he was looking at job ads for marketing managers on the computer, but he checked the time and said yes, and he drove her to the Tube station and on the way back he parked in a side street and popped into the baker's, because at around four o'clock they sometimes sell off the day's croissants in bags of four for a pound. And now he's been walking for over an hour, looking for his car; he is discovering streets he didn't know existed, even though they're so local, and is soaking wet and his life is unravelling. A traffic warden will have got there first and the trip will have cost him £60. All his minor resentments of his wife – the way she never closes cupboard doors, the way she asks what time it is even though he told her five minutes ago, her spelling mistakes, her *shoes*, and why couldn't she have taken the bus? – are building to a head: they should never have got married, divorce is now the only honest option. At his age, no one will employ him in marketing ever again. It becomes clear that he must immediately return to the baker's shop and ask for a job – never mind the early rising and the low pay, people will always need bread and if he's got nowhere to live he can even sleep there, next to the ovens at the back where it's warm and dry.



## BIRD OVER PRISON WALL

To escape – as the convicted spy George Blake did from this prison in 1966, using a rope ladder whose rungs were made of knitting needles – you need courage, self-belief and meticulous planning and attention to detail, besides contempt for the regime you are living under. (These qualities are possibly much the same as those that got you into the place you're now trying to get out of.) Then there is luck – a guard momentarily distracted, a pile of sand that cushions your fall after you miss a foothold – which you cannot determine, but which sometimes you can feel in your bones, as light as air, as in the hollow bones of birds that enable them to fly.



BLOCK OF FLATS

On the fourth floor of this building is the present location of what the police refer to as ‘The VIP Lounge’. (By the time you read this, it will have moved on.) It is a diversion on the route from the centre of town to Heathrow airport. For a generous fee, cab drivers will bring passengers with expensive luggage to the VIP Lounge to meet with four brothers – who have been variously described by the disoriented passengers as black, white, Arab, tall, swarthy, ‘of medium build’, etc. In a parody of a customs examination at the airport, the brothers will meticulously unpack the luggage and discuss with its owners their clothing, souvenirs, foreign currency, cameras, laptops, sex toys, whatever. Then, after confiscating certain items of value, the brothers will wish bon voyage to the passengers, who are driven blindfold to another part of town, from where they must hurry to catch their planes. This personalised form of robbery, involving relaxed communication between thief and victim, represents a sophisticated new trend in contemporary crime.



BLUE PLAQUE

Sri Aurobindo lived in this house in St Stephen’s Avenue during his early teens, before going to Cambridge to read the Classics and prepare for the Indian Civil Service examinations. (He passed the academic exams with distinction, but then decided he didn’t want to be an administrator and failed to turn up for the obligatory horse-riding test.) He later became a political activist in India, was imprisoned for his suspected involvement in the attempted assassination of a British official, and developed an influential philosophy of spiritual evolution. His father didn’t live to witness this part of Aurobindo’s life, nor read even one of the 24,000 lines of Aurobindo’s spiritual epic in blank verse in which he recounts the victory of humanity over ignorance, suffering and death: he died heartbroken after being misinformed that his son, on his return voyage to India in 1893, had died in a shipwreck off the coast of Portugal.