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HARTS

& Minds



DEFAMILIARISED (A Short Story)

Tyler Keevil

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Defamiliarised

Tyler Keevil

Around the time I was trying to decide whether or not to move to Wales, I went temporarily but completely blind. I woke in the night with a searing pain in my eyes and a headache so brutal it felt as if my scalp had been peeled off, the top of my skull removed. I made strange, high-pitched sounds and pawed at my bedside light, but when I finally flipped the switch no light came on. Or rather, I remained in the dark. I had the flickering thought that the bulb might have burst, but the darkness wasn't the normal dark of my room at night; it was total and absolute. It was blindness.

I understood all that but of course did not understand. I had no frame of reference, no glimmer of what might have caused it or what might be happening to me. I moaned, and cried, and lay in a paroxysm of panic for two or three minutes, but since I was living alone and had nobody on hand to help me, I eventually had to do something. My cell phone was on my bedside table. I fumbled for it and felt for the keypad with my thumb, picking out 9-1-1.

A voice answered: '911: what's your emergency?'

I cleared my throat. 'I can't see,' I said.

'Sorry, sir?'

'I've gone blind,' I said, feeling my head pulse with each heartbeat. 'I just woke up and have no vision, nothing. My head hurts, too. Do you think it could be meningitis?'

There was a pause. I guess it wasn't your typical 911 call.

'Where are you, sir?'

'I'm in my house. My basement suite, I mean.'

'We're going to send somebody over.'

'Do I have to stay on the phone?' I asked.

Another pause.

'What was that?'

'In the movies, they always keep you on the line.'

'You can keep talking to me if you want to.'

'It actually hurts my head. I was hoping I could just hang up.'

'The emergency crew will be there in a few minutes.'

I ended the call. I stayed sitting at the edge of my bed. I experimented by blinking, and that changed nothing. I felt around my eyes with my fingers, timid and tentative, as if afraid of finding some alien creature affixed to my face. My cheeks felt scorched, my eyelids puffy. My tear ducts were leaking. Touching it – moving in any way – hurt my head. It was like a cross between a terrible whisky hangover and extreme sunstroke.

I put down my phone, missed the bedside table, and dropped it on the floor. On the same table, I had a pack of Tylenol. I'd been having trouble sleeping, due to all the anxiety about Wales, and the decision, and the Tylenol helped put me out. I took two and swallowed them dry: grinding the pills into powder between my molars, the taste bitter and chalky. Then I lay back on my bed.

I was living alone, in a pathetic show of post-university independence, in a basement suite I'd rented from my friend's step-dad, who had since declared bankruptcy. I waited in that suite, alone and afraid, for somebody to come tell me why I could no longer see.

That morning my friend Mark had texted me to ask if I wanted to go snowboarding for his birthday, up Seymour. I was supposed to be working, but my boss at the landscaping company was pretty casual. It was seasonal work so the fact I went off to Wales for parts of the year suited the ebb and flow of his workforce, which grew in the spring with the grass and leaves, and withered to a skeleton crew in the winter and off-season. There were always other cutters, ready to take on your list, so he was happy to give us the occasional day off.

I told Mark I was game, called in sick, and started getting my gear together.

The main reason I wanted to go was because of the decision, this decision I had to make. On the one hand there was this girl, Lowri, who I was in love with – or at least thought I was; do we even know what love is at that age, in our early twenties? We think we do. I thought I did. More likely it was lust, and desire, and hunger for something different. But it felt real enough: a yearning and a longing. And that was pitted against everything else in my life: my home in Deep Cove, my friends, my family, my country, my culture, my entire realm of experience up to that point in my life. Faced with the momentousness of that, I did what I always do in times of crisis and deliberation: I retreated to my mountaintop.

Mark and I were the first riders in line when Mystery Chair opened. On the way to the top, as our chair shuddered and creaked past the support towers, we smoked a joint and listened to Mark's Misfit mix – one headphone for each of us. It was all so familiar, so set. Our routine. We talked about work, a friend who had gotten in a fight on the weekend, and we talked about girls. When Mark asked about Lowri I shrugged, brushed snow off my board.

'I'm still thinking of moving out there.'

'Like, forever?'

'For awhile. To try it out.'

He took a long toke. 'That's potent, man.'

'We'll see.'

From Mystery we rode down to the lift at Brockton, and at the top of Brockton ducked beneath the boundary flags into the backcountry. Carrying our boards behind our backs, two-handed, we trudged up Second Peak. The sky was absolutely clear and burning azure blue. The snow was slushy and the tiny grains glittered like mica in the glare of the sun. We found a ridge away from the other riders and built our own kicker. It took us about an hour and a half and by then I was sweating, stripped to my T-shirt, working away with my three-piece shovel. I'd taken off my gloves and toque and was wearing sunglasses. It was like being at the beach: a giant beach with pure white dunes all around us.

When we were done we hiked up to the top of our run and sat for a bit, catching our breath. I picked up a handful of snow and pressed it to my cheeks, my forehead, feeling the ice-burn. I had been panting and in the cold air could taste the iron of my blood. Mark asked me if I wanted to christen the jump but I waved him on.

'You're good, man.'

He strapped in. I watched as he dropped into a tuck and swooped towards the jump, bending his knees to absorb the G-force and then springing off the lip. He grabbed the back

of his board and pulled it across the front of his body, twisting his torso to accommodate it, and sailed twenty feet downslope. He landed in a splash of snow and rode it out casually, waving me on.

I tossed my ice-ball aside and stood up. I let the nose of my board angle downhill and it wavered a bit, like a compass needle, before finding its mark. I tried to imitate Mark's easy approach but for me it was more of a challenge: the ramp was almost vertical and at the top my board skated out from under me. I flew through the air like a floundering goose – head first, flapping my arms, craning my neck to sight my landing – and came down hard, flat-out, bouncing and tumbling, snow flying everywhere. I lay still, stunned. Mark rushed over and when he saw I was okay he started laughing: a loud, high-pitched braying, like a hyena.

'Your glasses,' he said.

I removed my sunglasses. One of the lenses was gone. The other was cracked and gritted with snow. There was snow, too, down my pants, up my shirt – and in my ears and nose and mouth. The friction, from those icy grains, had scoured a rash all up my belly.

'Well,' I said, and tossed the glasses aside, 'that fucking sucked.'

'It fucking rocked. Come on.'

I gathered my board, and my dignity, and followed Mark back up the hill. We took turns hitting the jump again, and again. I began to get a feel for it and tried out some tricks: moving from straight airs to one-eighties and then threes. By that point – about mid-morning – Mark was already smoothly and consistently landing rodeos, which were beyond me. But I was used to that, and it didn't matter. I threw myself again and again into the endless blue, with a kind of desperation – as if the answer to my dilemma was somewhere up there in the sky. When we'd worn ourselves ragged we returned to the top of our run and took off our shirts and wedged our boards upright in the snow, to serve as chair backs. Mark dug two Kokanees out of the snow where they were cooling and tossed one to me and we cracked those: the top of mine was flaked with ice. We sucked and swallowed and stared at the city.

'Hard to beat,' Mark said.

'Best place on earth.'

Directly beneath me I could see Indian Arm and the North Shore and Burrard Inlet. Across from it lay downtown – the skyscrapers lit up with sun fire, the whole city core blazing and lit up like some massive reactor. And then the sea, white-hot, as white as the snow, and in the horizon haze the mountains of Vancouver Island. I could see it all. My domain. I knew the trails on the mountain as well as I knew the layout of the streets. Wales and this girl, Lowri, seemed very far away and diminished in my memory.

'Would you give all this up?' I asked.

Mark shook his head. 'Your decision to make, man.'

'It's been eating me up.'

'Don't overthink it.'

'That's all I do.'

'When it comes to things like that, you just got to trust your gut.'

I drank to that – the simple wisdom of a mountain guru.

'Fuck it, man,' I said. 'This is my home.'

I stood up and strapped in. I thought I'd made my decision. To finalise it, I dropped towards our jump, and hucked a back flip: arching into the sky, hanging upside down for a time, defying gravity, with the sun suspended between my feet, as if I were falling into it.

The paramedic said, 'You're snowblind.'

He said it definitively, triumphantly – a eureka moment.

'Fuck,' I said.

'That actually happens?' his assistant said.

Two of them had come to my door. Fortunately I hadn't had to get up to open it. I heard them knocking, and shouted for them to come in. The door was unlocked, so they'd opened it themselves and walked in to find me lying there, terrified and incapacitated.

'Has to be,' the head paramedic said. His name was Zach. 'You went up riding. Didn't wear your goggles or shades. Bright spring day. Hours in the sun. Glare off the snow. Bam. Snowblind.'

He said it like a spell he'd cast on me.

'I was wearing sunglasses,' I said. 'But I broke them.'

'Exactly.'

'I'll be damned,' his assistant said, and sneezed.

'More common than you think.'

Zach's voice was deep, and when he had touched my face his fingers had felt rough and calloused. I imagine him now as quite big, but I have no idea if that's accurate since I never saw him, or his assistant.

'Always around this time of year,' Zach went on. 'I've seen cases up at Whistler, on the glacier. Usually partial. This is pretty extreme. People have different tolerances.'

All I knew about snowblindness was what I'd read in Farley Mowatt – one of his books about kids getting lost in the Arctic barrens. In that story, the condition was temporary. I tilted my face towards where I thought Zach was standing.

'It will improve, right?' I said.

'It should do. Yes. I've never heard of it doing permanent damage. Not unless you stared directly at the sun. Then you can fry your retinas, burn 'em up like celluloid. But no, not if it's just your average snowblindness. It's the equivalent of sunburning your corneas.'

'Can we treat it?' his assistant asked, and sneezed again. He either had a cold, or was allergic to my suite.

Zach said, 'Get out the kit.'

I heard a snapping sound, and then other noises – plastic tearing?

'I'm going to put a little gauze over your eyes,' Zach said. 'Just to keep the light out. You're also sunburnt badly, so we'll put some ointment on your cheeks and face. You been drinking liquids?'

'I had a few beers last night,' I said.

'That will dehydrate you more. Have water, and lots of it. Lie in the dark. Don't go outside for a bit. It should clear up in a few days.'

'A few *days*?' I said.

'Maybe a week.'

'What am I going to do?'

There was a pause. I had the feeling they were exchanging a glance, or making some gesture at my expense. They could have been doing anything.

‘Well,’ Zach said, ‘one thing you can do is wear ski goggles next time.’

I felt the gauze descend across my face, like a spiderweb. He kept it in place with medical tape, fastening it a little too rigorously.

‘Want us to call anyone?’ he asked.

‘I have my phone,’ I said.

His assistant sneezed, a third time.

‘I can call people,’ I said.

Only I didn’t. I didn’t know who to call, or what I’d say if I did. After the two of them had gone, I took some more Tylenol and lay on my back, breathing. I could hear traffic passing on the Parkway and the wheezing of the heating vent. That was all. That was my world. That and the mattress beneath me. I lay like that and at some point I drifted off, and when I awoke I had a brief, renewed sensation of panic before I remembered about the paramedics, the condition, the gauze on my eyes. The traffic seemed to have dwindled, and I was hungry. It had to be evening.

I stood up. The headache was still there, but more tolerable and less spiky: the dull blaring of a bassoon at the back of my brain. I pocketed my phone and felt my way around my desk to the door. Stepping into the hall, I cracked my shin on my snowboard, which fell over and clattered on the hardwood. I picked my way past it, using the walls for guidance and support, and stepped timidly into the kitchen.

I couldn’t cook, obviously. Getting out pots, using utensils, igniting the burner: all that was beyond me. Instead I found my fridge and tugged the door open. The cool air felt refreshing on my sun-scorched face. I stood for a moment, savouring that, until the compressor kicked in and the fridge started to hum, like a rocket about to take off. I felt around inside. The shelves were cold and slick and I couldn’t recognize any of the contents. I pushed glass jars aside and knocked over something that sounded like a juice carton. On the shelf below I found a packet that crinkled pleasantly. Inside it held a hard, firm cube. I was hoping for cheese, and got tofu. It would have to do.

I had bread, somewhere. I thought I’d left it on the counter but my hands – finger-walking around like crabs – found only a kettle, a lot of dirty plates and crockery, and boxes of cereal. I tried one of the cupboards above the stove, and in there felt the plastic-wrapped sponginess of Safeway bread. I couldn’t work the little twist tie so just tore the bag open. I got out two pieces and broke off a hunk of tofu and made a tofu sandwich. It wasn’t much but I felt satisfied by having achieved a meal. It was a step towards some kind of self-sufficiency.

I sat on the cold linoleum, and chewed, and thought. I would have to make adjustments. I was due to work the next day and that was out. Then there was Mark’s birthday party, which was that night. It had probably started already. That was out, too. I would have to call him, and my boss, at some point. But I didn’t feel up to that just yet. Instead, when I finished my sandwich, I stood and shuffled into the living room, with my hands out in front of me, like a sleepwalker. Beneath my feet the linoleum gave way to carpet. I aimed towards where I thought the stereo should be, found the television, and readjusted course. From the bottom of the screen I felt my way down to the CD-player and managed to turn it on and eject the tray.

The CDs were more of a problem. That was just a craps shoot. I pulled one from its case and put it on. The first bars of Siamese Dream emerged. I hadn't listened to that CD for three or four years. The tunes were infused with memories: beach parties, night swimming, furtive fumblings in tents and closets and other people's bedrooms. I'd been blind then too, in a way. We're all blind in our youth, like little grubs nosing our way towards maturity.

As I listened to it, I felt my way around the living room walls, getting a sense of the space and distances. The table was two steps from the rear wall and four from the side wall. The edge of the table aligned with the arm of the sofa. There were posters on the wall and I ran my palms across their glossy, smooth surfaces, marvelling at their meaninglessness. The posters, like the CDs, were a few years old. I'd stopped buying new things. I was always saving up to fly out to Wales, or for the holidays Lowri and I took when she was here. And since the prospect of a move was hanging over me, I hadn't invested in new furnishings, appliances, or technology. It was all second-hand, like the fridge that wanted to take off.

When I had a rough idea as to the layout of my realm, I sat on the sofa in my personal darkness and let the album run its course. At the end of the disc I heard it whirr and brake, spinning to a stop. I got out my phone. The first person I called was Mark. He answered immediately, shouting something like 'Dude – where are you? I've been leaving messages.' They were already at the club, The Shore, which we'd been going to since we could legally drink. I didn't tell him about being snowblind. It seemed too much. He could barely hear.

'I can't make it, man. I gotta sell you out.'

'Did you fall in a ditch or what?'

I smiled. 'I fell in a ditch, all right.'

'It's my birthday, man.'

'I'll take you out dancing next week.'

'All right – but you're missing a killer party.'

'Do a shot for me. And call me tomorrow, eh? I got to tell you something.'

'You're going to propose.'

'Third time lucky.'

After we hung up I sat for a bit, thinking of the club, the party. Mark had sounded overly jocular – a clear sign he was stung – but after a few drinks he would get over it, and after a few days he wouldn't care or probably even remember that I hadn't been there.

Before calling into work I shuffled to where I'd knocked the snowboard over. There was only a week or two left in the season before the lifts closed, which meant I was done for the year. I carried the board over to my closet, reached for the light switch automatically and only realised my error after I switched it on. But I knew where the board went. I stood it up between my hockey sticks and camera gear, amid the detritus from previous stages of my life.

I sat down in the closet. It was warm and quiet in there and it didn't seem to matter where I sat, when I couldn't see. I dialled again: my boss this time. He wasn't in office at that hour. The work phone rang and rang. Eventually the answering machine clicked, and my boss's voice droned on about their hours and services. When the beep came, I started explaining that I'd injured myself snowboarding. I hadn't really planned out what to say.

'I'm real sorry,' I said, 'especially as you gave me yesterday off. But I won't be able to make tomorrow, or the day after. It's pretty bad.' I paused. I imagined I could hear the

whir of the tape, recording me, taking my statement. 'I don't know how long I'll be off for, actually. I don't know when I'll be back. But I'll call to confirm, next week.'

I ended the call. I sat for a time with the phone in hand. On the Parkway, traffic had dropped off entirely. It was night. Maybe near midnight – and late enough that it would be morning for Lowri, and not inappropriate to call. She'd probably even be expecting it, since I'd told her about Mark's birthday, and I often called her when I was drunk, to flirt or argue with her, depending on our moods.

I dialled. The ringtone was different than with Mark or my work. British phones ring in longer pulses than North American ones. It rang three times and she answered. She didn't say my name, or hello – just made a purring sound in her throat, encouraging and inquisitive.

'You don't have to talk,' I said. 'I just wanted to phone.'

'Sleeping,' she murmured.

'Stay on the line a while, will you?'

I stood up. I shuffled from my closet back into my bedroom. I lay on the bed, so we'd be on the same wavelength, as it were. After a minute, I heard a low, drawn out 'Ah' sound. A yawn.

'Are you at Mark's?' she asked.

'I didn't go.' I waited, then added, 'I was too burnt out.'

I'd expected to tell her, but it didn't seem to matter, now that we were talking. When I talked to her, I often closed my eyes and just listened – trying to picture her face, her body, her surroundings. Our relationship, over the phone, was non-visual.

I asked, 'You performing in Brecon today?'

'Erwood.'

'That's right.'

She was working with a community theatre company, touring *Romeo and Juliet*.

'But I have...' she said, and paused to yawn again, 'the morning off.'

'Sorry I got you up.'

'It's nice.'

I heard rustling, shifting. Maybe she'd just rolled over. I almost told her then about my vision, but didn't, and because I didn't I knew I never would – not her, or anybody else.

'I talked to Stephen,' she said. That was her director. 'He said they could give you a job, as a stagehand.'

'I make a good grunt.'

'Ten pounds an hour. It's not much but...'

'It's more than I'm making now.'

We were quiet. It was hanging right there, between us. Our potential life.

'How are you lying?' I asked.

'On my side.'

I turned over, too. I curled up, closing my sightless eyes. I pretended it was morning, not night, and that I was with her, over there: my arms around her midriff, my chest pressed to her back, my nose nuzzled in her hair. We were breathing in and out together, our body-rhythms matched, our lives attuned. I could almost believe that when I opened my eyes, the spell would be broken; I'd have my vision back, and be living in a strange land called Wales.

Biography

Tyler Keevil is a research student at Aberystwyth University, where he is in the process of completing his PhD in Creative Writing; his thesis consists of a road novel, *The Drive*, and an accompanying reflective-critical essay on the history of the road story genre. His short fiction has appeared in a wide range of magazines and anthologies, and he has received numerous awards for his work, including the Writers' Trust of Canada Journey Prize. He is also a Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of Gloucestershire. 'Defamiliarised' was developed with the aid of a Literature Wales Writers' Bursary supported by The National Lottery through the Arts Council of Wales.