

# INTERNATIONAL SERVICE

by John Boyne

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I've devised an escape plan. The tall lady doesn't keep as close an eye on me when the fat man isn't around and this can work to my advantage. It's all a question of timing. Every morning, after he leaves, she stretches out on the sofa and watches shows where men and women sit in front of an audience and verbally abuse each other. There's a tagline at the bottom of the screen that says what their particular quarrels are and I must say I'm appalled by a lot of it. Low, trashy people. Not the type that interest me at all. But they interest the tall lady a lot and it's this distraction which will help me make my escape.

The fat man goes out every morning when I'm still trapped in my chair, helplessly dribbling the slimy gunge they force me to eat down my chin. (Of course, if they allowed me a proper spoon I wouldn't make such a mess but they insist of giving me this plastic monstrosity with the face of a monkey on the handle which is very awkward to use.) Before he leaves she fusses around me like I'm the second coming and the moment he's out the door she picks me up, rips my clothes off, cleans, powders and dresses me before imprisoning me for an hour or so while she washes the dishes or starts the laundry. I call it a prison but it's actually a plastic fortress, perhaps four feet by four, with soft meshing on the sides to stop me from climbing out. It mocks my low stature and I despise it. Usually when the programmes start she'll let me out of it and until a few weeks ago I would crawl around and do a little investigating but now I can almost walk and it's because of that new found talent that I've hatched my plan.

It came to me last night while I was lying in my crib, frowning up at the frankly terrifying clowns that hang above me, moving slowly back and forth through the air. (Sometimes I find it hard to sleep because of them. They're as bad as the monkey-spoon. They are the stuff of nightmares.) All I could think of when I was lying there was how incredibly bored I was. The problem is that there's nothing to do for most of the day, I'm not in control of my own movements, and as for the number of indignities I'm subject to... well I wouldn't know where to begin. This is not what I was told it would be like in orientation when I accepted the position of "Jackson, Carl & Lisa, Lon, Eng, Baby Boy #2" and I don't mind telling you that if I could go back to H.Q. I'd be having a few words with the Placement Officer about false advertising.

I'd waited quite some time, you see, to fulfil my international service. I wanted people that sounded worthy of me, gourmets preferably, with a love of the arts. Wealthy types. Oh I know that some of the others saw me as a bit of an eccentric but I was happy to smile and point my finger at them. You, my fellows, are the eccentrics, I would cry. You line up for challenges, the more freakish the better, when you know that the choices you make will have ramifications on your lives for the next sixty, seventy, eighty years. I recall one young spirit who was always first in line at the placement meetings and waited until he heard the phrase "Raksomasash, Vigilia, sgl, Map, Moz, Baby Boy #8," before taking the plunge, sensing hopelessness and despair, as if poverty and hardship was a tattoo to be worn with pride. Another one practically

leapt out of her seat when she heard “Leeson, George and McKinley, Jonathan, NYC, USA, Baby Girl #1” sensing an opportunity to shock society. Well that’s all very well for them but not for yours truly. I wanted something more than that. I’ve had more than my share of troubles over the last few millennia and now that I couldn’t put off my placement any longer I wanted it to go by as quickly and easily as possible. (Actually I had only a few days left to volunteer before I would have been simply selected by the Placement Officer for the next opening so I couldn’t waste any time. I prayed for something with a title but it wasn’t to be. And so – O foolish me! – I chose these Jackson people.)

They were carefree days back at H.Q. but – just as my feet find their way on their grainy carpets and my tongue begins to twist and contort into a syllable or two of coherence – so the memories are starting to fade. They told us in orientation that this would happen. ‘As you get more capable of surviving out there,’ said the P.O. at our last session of classes, during the Trinity term, ‘you’ll forget all about us and the happy times here at H.Q. The memories will last just long enough for you not to be shocked or traumatised by the realities of the vile existence to which you are doomed. But worry not, my young spirits, for in the blink of an eye it will all be over and you can return to us forever.’ Well I’ve been blinking a lot and it doesn’t seem to be ending. So it looks like I’m stuck here for the time being.

Hence my decision to make a bid for freedom. I’m sure these Jackson people are all very nice in their own way but it’s out of the question to stay. I mean they make sure to keep me fed – if you can call it food – and clean most of the time, although I could do without them sniffing my nether regions every five minutes; it’s disconcerting and undignified. When I have relieved myself without benefit of bathroom or privacy they pull a face and inform me that I have a message in my nappy for them. *You do*, they squeal in delight, for such are the perversions of the tall lady and the fat man. *You do you do you do you do you do you do*. Yes, I bloody well do so can we just clean me up with the minimum amount of fuss please? The Placement Officer warned us about these indignities too but I never realised just how humiliating they would be. Only last week, there were three other ladies here for lunch with the tall lady, one considerably older than the others, and when I was lying on the floor in the altogether – unabashed, I might add, for my endowments are not unimpressive – they insisted on pressing their lips to my belly and blowing hard before screeching hysterically, like a bunch of doped-up hyenas. They thought I was giggling in delight. I wasn’t. I was feeling ill and shaking my legs in the air in a brave but hopeless attempt to pincer one of their necks and squeeze tightly for as long as was necessary to send them back to H.Q.

No, my escape plan is not designed because of the tall lady and the fat man but rather because of my two enemies in the house, both of whom seem full of malice and ill will towards me. The first is the Furry Quadruped with its incessant yap-yap-yapping all the live-long day. It’s never taken to me and is by far the least popular member of the household for it suffers any number of clouts about the snout on a daily basis. But the Furry Quadruped hounds me. One evening I was sitting in a corner, perusing the evening paper which had been helpfully left on the ground, reading about this Bush fellow who I remember all too well for we took a class in interpretive dance together many centuries ago, back at H.Q. (Like me the poor creature had put off international service for as long as possible but was too dim to listen up over the last few

days of his volunteer years for a decent placement; but as luck would have it when his number got called he went to rich folk in Kennebunkport. Exactly the kind of placement I would have wanted for myself.) Anyway I was reading about his latest piece of buffoonery when the Furry Quadruped appeared out of nowhere – like Lucifer reeking havoc about the heavens – and tore into my reading, making every suggestion that it would have at my throat next. Had it not been for the fat man lumbering into view I would most certainly have been dispatched back whence I had come, which I could not allow because it's against the rules to return until you're summoned. The F.Q. was dragged away from me by the F.M. while the T.L. looked on, using disgraceful language which seemed to quieten the beast but I could tell by the way it looked at me as it was thrown out of doors that ours was a conversation which had not yet reached its conclusion. Before long, I knew, he would demand satisfaction.

My other enemy is the one I call the Excitable Short One, previously no doubt known as "Jackson, Carl & Lisa, Lon, Eng, Baby Boy #1". He's a frenetic little monster, given to spontaneous outbursts of tears, laughter, hyperactivity, whatever takes his fancy, but the chilling thing is the way he appears above my crib at night when there's no one around to guard me and stares down, eyes narrowed, teeth bared, hell's own brute. Two nights ago he actually leant down and whispered to me the following startling line: "I never wanted you here. You're in the way. I hate you. You're on my list." I'm not sure if he mistook me for someone else because I fail to see how the E.S.O. could possibly dislike me when I've barely given him the time of day. Granted there was one unfortunate moment when a large dinner I had recently eaten returned from my stomach undigested and landed on his head, causing him no end of anguish, but had I the words the poor lad would have received my unrestrained apologies. Instead he seems never to have recovered from the indignity and I was on his list, whatever list this might be.

And so this morning I await my chance. I must escape. I have it all planned out. I will wait for the Fat Man and the Excitable Short One to leave the house, suffer the ignominy of my ablutions and prison one final time while the Tall Lady cleans the kitchen, and then, when she returns to the living room with her coffee and biscuits for a challenging morning of televisual entertainment I will hope that I am released to roam at will. Then, following in the paw-prints of the Furry Quadruped, I will make use of the swinging flap on the kitchen door and slowly, furtively, and (I hope) with not a little panache, I shall make my way through, into the world beyond, which the Placement Officer referred to in one of his more unsettling lectures as 'a woeful place, filled with misery, lechery and cruelty, presided over by that ridiculous spirit, so talented at interpretive dance but lacking reason or commonsense and who landed on his feet with the Bushes of Kennebunkport, an error of mine own, for which I take full responsibility'.

His warnings ring true to me and I take them under advisement but nevertheless the world beyond the flap is where I must go. I must escape the ministrations of the Fat Man and the Tall Lady, the psychological warfare of the Excitable Short One, and the plain viciousness of the Furry Quadruped and seek my fortune abroad.

The first part is done, there is only the Tall Lady and I left in the house. But I am feeling strange this morning. The memories of the past life, alongside my friends and the Placement Officer, seem to be fading today, an unsettling change. Left for a few minutes on the floor earlier I attempted to read a magazine but the words became fuzzy, the letters dissolving into

alphabet soup before my eyes, and I had to look away because I feared I would start crying. She approaches now, the kitchen must be clean, and says something to me. I'm barely listening, I want her to sit down and release me from my prison. The door – oh happy day! – has been left open, giving me a clear run towards the flap. But my head feels strange. Perhaps it's the excitement. I can feel strange sounds coming out of my mouth unbidden; none of them make any sense but the Tall Lady is staring at me and asking me questions. Now she lifts me up and places me on the ground before switching on the television and settling on the sofa. She looks away from me and my chance has come. My knees are pressed to the ground, my hands outstretched, ready to give loyal service. I will ignore the fact that my tongue cannot stop itself from moving and my throat is making involuntary gargles as if trying to formulate specific sounds. Why am I doing this again? Escape, of course. For freedom. The... where was I before here? There was a place with others, I think... wasn't there? It will come back to me in a moment, I'm sure of it.

My four limbs move together to steer me towards the flap and the memories are fading now as I close in on it. I hear something from behind, a scampering of energy, and sure enough it's the Furry Quadruped, racing towards me but far enough away that I might escape yet. I pick up the pace and head for the door. Only a few more feet to go. But the F.Q. is gaining on me. It's now or never. It's yap-yap-yapping and it's alerted her but I'm there and reach out a hand to push the flap open. It swings and I catch sight of the world beyond, the grass, a flowerbed, a rainbow of colour like the memories of the other time, the time before, which time before? It's escaping me now as I'm lifted up, freedom denied, into the arms of the Tall Lady who says something to me and I touch her on the nose – all memories fleeing now, betraying a dying whisper of hope – and say her name out loud for the first time.