

Global Positioning System

By B. D. Reeves

I knocked on the door of Laurence Botham's office, editor of *Corporate Fleet* car magazine. He peered up from his computer screen, then he looked back down. Everyone called him Botto. I waited. He had a pale complexion, a proportion to his face. He'd just returned from a cycling trip in the South of France and he was processing his digital photos: Botto in lycra, dark glasses, an expensive slip-stream helmet and leather gloves, crouched on the side of the road fixing a patch on his tire.

"Tom hasn't called back," I said. "Thought I'd take out the Jag, do the story on the GPS. What do you think?"

"Ah ha..."

"I'll take it through the city. That'll be my angle—GPS in the CBD. How does it handle the traffic? Does the electronic voice drive you mad at the lights? I'll check the tone, the pitch, the spacing and repetition."

He didn't move. You never knew what Botto thought until he said it. What you saw in his face was your own false projection. I'd never seen him angry, never seen him laugh.

"Alright mate. But be careful. I pulled some strings to get this one. Limited release. I don't want it dirty or scratched. No marks. We need it pristine for the pics."



He put the keys on the edge of the desk without looking up from the screen: Botto holding a baguette like a cricket bat. Botto gliding down a hill. Botto in the streets of a provincial village. Botto riding up a hill.

Martin lived in a converted bed-sit on St Georges road. I parked the Jag and knocked on Martin's door. The car was a deep maroon and stood radiant against the stark winter trees with its tinted windows and gleaming silver hubs.

Stumbling noises came from inside and the

dull thud of padded feet. Martin opened the door and I at once saw a man who had somehow missed his thirties and had fallen into deep middle-age. He wore odd socks and tracksuit pants and had lost substantial amounts of hair; he huddled himself together in a black duffle-coat.

Martin had lived in a small bungalow alone on his father's hobby farm in the countryside. He'd recently moved back to the city. We studied philosophy together at university, but I hadn't seen him for several years.

"Hold on," he said, disappearing into the damp hallway.

I felt through my pockets as I waited, discovering a scrap of paper that read "*Pick up nappies and wipes.*"

He returned with a pair of Wellingtons and a bottle in a brown paper bag.

I knew that Martin hadn't seen anyone in a long time.

"Where should we go?" I asked

"Does this have voice activate?"

"I don't know, you tell me."

"CASINO," he said. "No voice activate."

"I'll put it in the review. Just type something in."

Anything. It didn't matter. We just wanted to drive.

"What's with the Wellingtons?" I asked.

"Just in case I get struck by lightning. Besides, I got used to the country look. In summer I picked blackberries. I traversed the paddocks and heaths of spinifex, sometimes as far as the

bushland at the base of a mountain. One day, I scaled the granite peak. I'm thinking of wearing a kaftan."

He took a swig from the brown paper bag. We were coming to the top of King Street.

At the next intersection, turn left.

"Don't spill it," I said. I could smell his breath, cheap whisky and coke.

"I'm not gonna spill it, mate. Not on your precious corporate icon." He lit a cigarette.

"You better ash that out the window."

"Excuse me, but this ashtray costs more than a Bangladeshi's dinner, and I'm going to try it out. Factory special?"

"I don't know," I said. "Look, it's just a job. In the world of car journalism there's a whole vocabulary I don't understand. I just plug abstractions into formulas. I distance myself from their meaning. I actively mock them. I practice a form of ironic detachment: *I'm not really this*—is what the double says—*I'm just earning a living*. You know I hate cars. But it could be worse. The guy who does the Quarry magazine—you know, for mining companies—he writes stories about machines that crush rocks. Giant caterpillars. Trucks with wheels the size of a two-story house."

"At least there's integrity in washing dishes," said Martin. "Acts of purity. The passing from *dirty* to *clean*—you might as well be cutting the throats of sheep."

“So now you’re some kind of mystical kitchen hand?”

Keep driving for the next two blocks.

“I grew vegies out there. I watched the clouds pass over the mountains. I saw the sun in the mist of the light drought rain. Rural wives seduced me. I’m thirty-three—it’s my Jesus year.”

“Why did you come back?”

“I was afraid. Look what happened to Kerouac on Desolation Peak.”

“He had structure at least. He was looking for fires.”

“A farmer wanted to kill me.”

“Right.”

At the next traffic light, turn left.

Martin came from a family of high achievers. His father was a barrister, his mother an academic in Russian history who moved to America on million-dollar imbursements. He was born while they were establishing themselves, but they doted on his younger sister. His father would get tipsy and weep when she played the violin. Now they are divorced.

“So tell me”, he said, “do you think sex is different when you want to conceive?”

“I don’t know, Martin.”

“You’re the one with kids. I want to know—if it isn’t just a screw, does it mean something? A slow and tender arousal, a dissipated anxiety

lowering the threshold, unleashing natural forces. You’d have to last much longer.”

“If you really want to know, it’s just calculus. Calendars marked with coloured dots, half-dots, full-dots around optimal points of insemination.”

We stopped at some traffic lights on the Prince’s bridge where an old tramp threw scraps of bread into the water below. The Jag purred and for a moment Martin and I drifted apart in the random happenstance before us. It was hard to imagine that ten years ago we had met in our first philosophy lecture.

After our tutorials, we would all go down to the pub and throw logic puzzles at Martin that he would solve, no matter how drunk. Moral dilemmas. The intractable problems of consciousness.

He never paid for drinks. I had never seen him read. He only slept in lectures. We were always half awed, half jealous when he pulled in one high distinction after another.

If his scholarship to Cambridge came as no surprise, neither was his dismal performance once there. I had heard that he rarely left the local pub and never wrote a word of his thesis. It was to the great embarrassment of his parents, whose only offer of assistance was to pay for his air-fare home and give him the cottage to “sort himself out.” Better to cut their losses than endure the continued image of their son as some kind of antipodean joke.

“Here’s a moral dilemma for you,” I said for old time’s sake. “Picture this: We’re standing on

Platform nine at Richmond station.”

“Platform nine specifically?”

“Platform nine. There’s a mother, black leggings, loose white tea shirt, blond hair, screaming on platform six.”

“To whom?”

“I’ll get to that. The space between us suddenly comes alive. The reality of distance. Gaps in the platform plainly visible. She’s pulling her daughter by the arm. She tries to get on the train, the doors won’t open. Faces framed in the train’s glass remind me of a cubist painting. There is movement around her, energy which dissipates and slows to the edges of a stillness along the perimeters where people appear not to stare. In an instant we on our platforms are united. We start to look up, into each other’s eyes. She bangs on the window as the train pulls away, then says to her daughter, ‘it’s your fault you little bitch.’

‘Mum. Stop it. You’re hurting me,’ the little girl says.”

“Is that it?”

“There’s more. A man, wearing tracksuit pants and a flannel shirt, emerges from the tunnel and walks onto the middle platform, entering the scene between us and the woman and her daughter. It is evident that he has a slightly paralysed arm which he holds close to his stomach. He throws the other arm about with violent intention in the air as he shouts across the track, ‘I’m gonna kill you bitch.’”

“Are you finished?”

“Not yet.”

The lights turned green.

At the roundabout, take the third exit.

“Two lovers on our platform look at each other and there is something vital between them, something private and emergent, like a secret wink. The man with the paralysed arm, he’s distant, but tantalisingly close. He is marooned on an island between our platform and the one where the woman is now screaming back, ‘You’re a fuck’n gutless pimp!’

From our position of relative safety we smile. Shuffle. People are giggling. We notice the composed restraint of the faces opposite us. In those who are too close, we see who we could have been. We feel *life* pulse in our bodies. We are no longer strangers, we collectively exhale, we transcend class, we are an audience.”

“I’ve had enough.”

“Just listen. The train cuts through this scene. It is a violent penetration, a metallic curtain. Through the sound of its electric engine we hear the sound of a mother’s slap; through the screeching brakes we hear the crying of the little girl.”

“I don’t understand. What’s your question?”

“What could I have done?”

At the next traffic lights, turn right.

“Nothing,” Martin said. “You did what you were programmed to. It’s called self-preser-

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"...how it handled on the open road," but all I could see in
response was that blank, vacant face.**

vation.”

“Surely it’s more than that?”

“There’s no guarantee that your intervention would in any way have helped the girl. Granted, she is still young and her condition is therefore more tempting for the moral drive, but even the thought of the long-term commitment, time and energy needed to make a difference is exhausting enough to kill off a momentary impulse. I mean, would you have been prepared to make that kind of commitment?”

“I don’t know. Maybe... no.”

“Then you must live with the knowledge that the little girl suffers.”

“There must be moments of tenderness.”

“That’s just blind hope. Trauma destroys happiness.”

“What is happiness?”

At the next traffic lights, turn left. Then take the first right.

“I don’t know,” Martin said. He had a sad, sullen kind of look. It could have been the drink. It could have been that the idea of the crying girl had cut through his cynicism.

We had turned down onto the highway and were passing over the Westgate Bridge where I

caught only glimpses of a blue expanse beyond the industrial fringe, the smooth streaks of currents on the surface of the ocean and the far-off clouds and the glitter of long-gone ships.

“You’re meant to be the philosopher,” I said.

“I’ll tell you about happiness. You know how many suicides jump off this bridge each week? Picture this: the moment before impact.”

“That’s happiness?”

“If happiness is freedom. The pure freedom of the will in the face of inevitability.”

“Tell that to the parents.”

“Sorry, I forgot you had kids. Human happiness held to ransom by the fortunes of your own flesh and blood—now that’s my idea of insanity.”

“I’m sure it’s not. I’m sure it’s what you have.”

“And what do I have?”

“I don’t know—detachment?”

At the next exit, turn left.

“Okay Mr job wife kids. Look at my hair. I got it cut yesterday. Touch it. Feel the strokes of God. The apprentice, she’s holding me, her fingers in the nape of my neck; now she’s washing me, a stranger’s hands cutting through my hair, scalp tingling with exquisite intimacy. Pure. Silent.

Beyond the world. A deep connection.”

“That’s not connection,” I said. “That’s just longing for connection.”

“She felt it too. I gave her my number.”

“Did she call you? ...No.”

“Fuck you.”

Take the next exit on the left.

He turned away and looked out of the window. There is violence in conversation—is this why we talk? Is it nothing more vital than this? The past, however recent, reconstitutes. The eruption of memory, story, recovery. The long forgotten incidents sparked and divined by another’s words, penetrating the layers beyond. A two way agreement staving off reality. The space of matter ripping through the subterfuge, colliding, shattering then cutting the tendons of connection, pulling, gathering oneself with another out of some terrible loneliness.

We kept driving in silence, passing sad fringe suburbs like Deer Park and Caroline Springs and then on through Melton where we stopped for a while in some banked up traffic at the lights.

Martin was drinking from the bag. I watched a man, on his front lawn, washing his dog. He was gripping the back of the animal’s neck, pressing its tendons, locking its nerves. The water, parting its back, ripped a line of shining white in the August sun, smooth and radiant.

“Martin, where are we going?” I asked. He had opened the glove box and was flicking

through the Jaguar Owner’s Manual.

“To the farm,” he said.

“How far is that? I’ve got to be getting back.”

“Not far. About another forty kilometres.”

Continue driving for eighty kilometres.

“Shit, Martin.”

“O.K, so I’ve underestimated the distance. I apologise. I’m human. I lack the precision of a machine. But I *can* construct meaningful sentences. I have reason and behavioural versatility.”

“Save the Descartes—I’ve got to get back, drop the Jag off for the photographer...”

“I can see it now—shimmering in the cheap gloss of August.”

“...then type up my story, make a few last calls, get home in time for Aaron’s bath.”

The lights turned green and we continued driving. The gears were smooth, the engine pulling easily to eighty in the space of a breath with effortless torque. Before long we were on the Western Highway. I thought I had better test the acceleration. I put on the pedal and heard a sucking, rumbling sound, and then a sudden surge of power. We passed a line of trucks, pressed against the seat with the sensation of a jumbo taking off. It felt impossible to stop, the deep vibrations of the Jag affirming all that it conveyed in our gaze, the road, the twisted trees in the open widening land, the eroded gullies and the rusted scattered objects of the houses on the

edges of suburbia.

“A machine has reason...” Martin continued.

“Is this a statement, or a fact?”

“You’re meant to say, ‘a machine has reason... a machine can construct meaningful sentences.’ And I say, ‘only in the sense of pure calculation. Not beyond the determinations of its code. But surpassing that of a human being.’”

“Are we reliving a seminar now?” I asked. “In that case, define rationality.”

“That’s easy,” Martin said. “It’s terror.”

“Terror? Rationality is terror?”

“When you fully comprehend it.”

“You mean, ‘a machine can’t feel terror.’”

“I mean rationality itself. In its essence.”

“I don’t suppose we could move the conversation beyond first year philosophy,” I said.

“Just forget it.”

“Come on Martin. You haven’t even told me what you’ve been doing.”

He stared out of the window. I thought of Botto, I don’t know why—tracking us with his indifferent stare, a little yellow ball on his screen like Pacman, but eating the road.

I tried to imagine his reaction, the excuses I’d make, “...how it handled on the open road,” but all I could see in response was that blank, vacant face. It could have been the excuse I needed to feel the sense of that life behind me moving further and further away, entertaining a perverse possibility for as long as it could still hold together, on the verge of an inner hilarity I

couldn’t quite explain.

“Alright,” I said. “We’ll go to the farm. But then we’ve got to drive straight back.”

“I’ve been trolling,” Martin said.

“What?”

“You asked me what I’ve been doing. And *that’s* what I’ve been doing.”

“Trolling? On the internet? You haven’t.”

“I have.”

“Why?”

“The power. The satisfaction of watching fine minds squirm. The doubt. The logic of regression—how long will they maintain the façade of civility? I imagine I’m taking them down the Congo.”

“And who do you imagine yourself to be in this game—Marlow, or Kurtz?”

“Both.”

“You can’t be both.”

“Wasn’t Kurtz a figment of Marlow’s imagination?”

“So the people you troll—they are the ‘civilized?’”

“I’m interested in that point, that moment of fluctuation, the dusk, the winding snake in the jungle, when they no longer know if they should keep slithering forward, or start to recoil like a worm. It’s a cosmic tale of Logos and the Pure Malevolent Will. It concerns the fate of reason itself.”

“That’s nasty.”

“Life’s nasty.”

“What if they were your sister?”

“I’d troll my sister.”

“Yes, I’d believe that. You *would* troll your own sister.”

He took a swig from the bottle. We hadn’t yet cleared the line of trucks and the cars, bearing up behind, beeping and flashing their lights, locking us into the road. I floored the accelerator just in time as we surged up the hill towards Bacchus Marsh, now passing the trucks but unable to stop or pull to the side. The road, cutting through the hilltop, dipped sharply and curved away into a valley below as I held us out from scraping along the safety barrier. The rigs barred up behind us, but the road was open and free. I hit the cruise control.

“I’m interested—when does it happen? Do you wake up and think, ‘I feel like trolling today?’ Is it more active, like stalking? Is it an addiction?”

“It’s all of them, and more. It has to start with the right feeling, towards the right object, with the right motive, in the right way. I particularly like professors.”

“Professors? No...”

“Yep.”

“You bring them down?”

“I turn them into savages, cracking their Apolline glaze.”

“Like a Greek potter, is that it? You turn the wheel and scratch at the clay...”

“Until sublime forms appear. Shapes they never expected. Imagined.”

“Monsters. Sybils. Furies. You really are sick.”

“I’m just a symptom.”

“Of what—the Horror?”

“The Horror? That’s a kind of innocence—it’s almost quaint. This isn’t the Promethean gaze of virtue into the mirror of the primal deep. This isn’t the genius of depravity. Confession. Self-immolation. Not even Nietzsche could see us men of the post-future.”

“Post-future—come on! What does that even mean?”

“You’ll never know.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re Kurtz’s wife. You’re just a wreckage hunter. I see you, combing beaches for fuselage. We live in an age of golden showers—except that in the great descent of metals, the Ancients never imagined a world of Silicon.”

“Jesus, Martin—you need to get out more.”

“I have a reputation to uphold.”

“And what’s your troll name?”

“*Entropy.*”

“Of course.”

Take the next turn on the left.

“It’s up here,” he said. “The dirt road.”

I drove with some anxiety, hearing stones flick up into the chassis. The Jag would already be covered in dust.

We came up towards the cottage and I saw the image of a fibro shack, a wooden veranda sinking in the middle, swathes of thistle-blown grass. Outside, there was an old cast iron bath sitting above a fire place dug into the ground

surrounded by wilted daffodils. I could picture him there, like the Marquis de Sade, lying out in the night, looking up at the stars.

“Just wait here,” he said. “Two minutes.”

I could see cows staring at us dumbly from the paddocks. A marshland and a creek. Beyond were the granite peaks.

Maybe he was looking for something. Maybe he just wanted to come back, to see what he had left behind. Perhaps he had lived too long in that cottage on his own.

He was trying to open the front door, then he disappeared around the back.

“Hurry up!” I called out.

I plugged in the coordinates to Martin’s house. He came around the other side. Then he checked the letter-box.

“All done,” he said, getting in the car.

“What were you doing?”

“Just checking the locks.”

“We came all the way out here, just to check the locks?”

“And the letter box.”

“Shit, Martin.”

“I had this terrible feeling I’d left the doors unlocked. That I’d find cattle and sheep living in the house. Pigeons roosting. Hobos and bums.”

“Did you get any letters at least?”

“A disconnection notice.”

We were back on the highway. Martin was taking regular sips from the paper bag. When he had finished it all, he threw the bottle down at his feet.

Then he lit another cigarette. I opened the window.

“Don’t you sometimes wish,” he said, “that you lived in a time when, simply by violating grammatical conventions, disintegrating syntax, you felt you were on the brink of a revolution?”

“I don’t know, Martin.”

Our talk had fragmented into little vignettes.

“You know, I once had a girlfriend who said I had lips like a mugwump. She was doing her thesis on Burroughs.”

“I can see why it didn’t last.”

We were eventually reduced to silence. For a while we just listened to the voice of the GPS as she guided us back to the city. It was a deep and brooding silence, the type I had not felt since adolescence. Soon, we were re-crossing the Westgate Bridge, descending home where the setting sun washed the mirrored buildings with a red, pathetic glow.

Martin had earlier drifted off to sleep. As we came off the bridge he sat up in the seat, startled, and began sniffing under his arms.

“I really stink,” he said.

“You don’t stink.”

“I do. I didn’t think I stank. My own stink woke me up.”

“I don’t smell anything,” I said.

“You’re sitting over there. Where I am, I stink.”

“What is stink?”

“*What is stink?*”

“Well, what’s your definition?” I said.

“There is no definition. You can’t define stink. You know stink. You smell stink. It’s in your nose, real particles inhaled, processed, interpreted in the primal regions of the brain. *Keep away*, your brain says, *there’s foulness, danger.*”

We had turned down the exit ramp and were driving through the edges of the city, passing along the river towards Punt Road. The trees were bare, their leaves floating and shimmering in the river as they sailed away towards the sea.

“You don’t stink Martin.”

“My life stinks.”

“Now you’ve changed the meaning. You’re being metaphorical.”

“What is a metaphor?”

I’d never been the one to answer questions. “You tell me.”

“A metaphor’s a metaphor,” he said. “I don’t know... *The wine-dark sea.*”

“The wine-dark sea?”

“The sea is wine-dark. It’s not *like* wine, that’s a simile. It’s the totality of the qualities of the wine in the sea. At sunset. You imagine right towards sunset, the death of the sun, behind the sea, the deep, rich red, you could drink the sea, you could drink and be drunk, I don’t know, drunk with beauty, now it’s a cliché, it’s not a cliché. It’s identity; my life stinks, stink’s unpleasant, my life’s unpleasant, my life’s offensive. *There’s* a connotation. Stink offends. I offend. Total identity.”

You have reached your destination.

“You don’t offend, Martin.”

“How about this: you fucking sellout corporate puppet.”

“It’s not going to work...”

“Alright. How’s Linda?”

“She’s okay,” I said. “Tired.”

“Sorry, I should have asked. And ‘how’s the kid?’”

“He’s good. Almost crawling.”

“You want to come in, or...”

“I’ve gotta go,” I said. “I’ll give you a call.”

“Well... thanks for the ride, lady,” he said. He shut the door, and then he traced something out in the dust on the roof of the Jag.

I watched him walk up to the entrance, leaning into the doorframe. He turned the latch, leaving his keys dangling in the lock. He stumbled on and disappeared into the darkness of the hall.

On the way back to the office I stopped at a service station on Canterbury Road, parking along the edge so I did not block the bowsers. The peak-hour lines stretched all the way to the road, blocking angry commuters who beeped their horns and screeched their tyres as they sped towards the next frustrating halt.

I took the squeegee bucket over to the Jag and began to clean methodically, starting on the roof, laughing as I erased the words *Corporate Arseholes* Martin had traced into the dust. Streaks of water were running down the doors like trickling rivers in a desert. The water became dirty, and soon all I could do was to redistribute the dust in liquid

form like a film of insipid ochre paint. It was useless, but I had done my best, working over the bonnet and, finally, the silver hubs, which had lost their brilliant sheen.

I took the bucket back and then went inside, took some nappies from the shelf and waited in line. Linda would be worried by now. Aaron would be awake and he would be hungry and moody as he always was at this hour.

Even in the dusk the streaks of painted dirt showed up along the once immaculate panels. I drove to the office. There was a figure, almost opaque, standing in the entranceway. As I pulled in, I saw that it was Botto. His arms were crossed; his legs were spread stalwart across the threshold of the door. In the headlights his eyes were shining red, like rabbits' in the night. And in his face—I could see anger. Maybe even rage.

Image: "[Jaguar F-Type Coupe R](#)" (CC BY 2.0) by [TheCarSpy](#)