

TOMORROW IN THE BATTLE

A Play

by Kieron Barry

|| SAMUEL FRENCH ||

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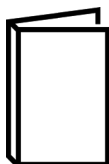
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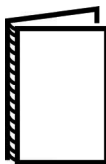


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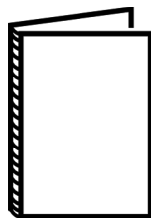
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kieron Barry was born in Stratford-upon-Avon. He survived a disastrous education at Glebelands School in Cranleigh and went on to take degrees at the University of Durham and Goldsmiths' College, London.

His plays include the verbatim drama *Stockwell*, which enjoyed two sell-out runs in London. It was described by *The Times* in its five-star review as “more gripping than anything else to be seen in the London theatre” and by the *Daily Express* as “stark, stunning...deeply poignant...one of the most important plays of the year.” The play prompted Barry's nomination for the Charles Wintour Award for Most Promising Playwright at the London Evening Standard Theatre Awards.

He is also the author of the one-act comedy *Numbers*, described as “sharp and funny, terrifying and inspiring” in Lucy Kerbel's book *100 Great Plays For Women* where it appeared alongside plays by Oscar Wilde, Tennessee Williams and Euripides.

His other plays include *Black Soap*, *Cumquats*, *Stories For Boys*, and *Lord Beckington (90) Reads From His Award-Winning Romantic Memoirs*.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

I once attended a performance of medieval music. After a lengthy sequence of unaccompanied vocal motets, a musician without warning strummed a single chord on a lute. Hardly the most lascivious of instruments, yet the effect was dazzling. The room all but gasped, as though a large tin of paint had been upset.

I became intrigued by the power of small effects in a desaturated aesthetic. Having just finished a piece of political verbatim theatre, I wanted to write whatever the opposite of that was; something pure and almost poetic, in which a single moment of overlapping speech – or the touch of two characters – might burst like a firework.

Another curiosity chimed pleasingly with all this; how to convey on stage not just action but interior sensation. Thus was I led to the monologue.

Many in the theatre are faintly biased against the monologue form. Ever obstinate, this emboldened me, as did seeing a masterpiece of the genre, Conor McPherson's *Port Authority*. Oblique, spellbinding and nothing but monologues. So I knew it could be done. And I could not find another way to bring fully into the light two murky and recurring preoccupations: our own perplexing conception of moral duty and the capricious zigzag of sexual desire.

I have never understood sex. Its discovery, like the dawning of one's religious faith, initially promises a life of joyful communion. Instead, both often bequeath journeys of unbearable loneliness. As a motive, sex appears flimsy and abstract in contrast to the quickly-grasped logic of, say, trade or revenge. As a problem, it is not only unsolvable but unclassifiable, like pain. In even the most well-ordered of homes we occasionally see desire thrashing its tail and insisting on its weird, destructive supremacy.

All too commonly and all too late we realise that the acts which have defined us did not seem to be choices at the time, still less choices with a moral component. Rather they were a series of instinctive thrusts propelling us towards what we want, or what we think we want, or whatever lies mysteriously behind that. The play attempts to put words to these wordless impulses and to dramatise that which is usually silent and invisible. It is perhaps, when all's said and done, a meditation on the impermanence of sexual joy and the impossibility of moral triumph. How strange that even the most straightforward of quests in life – wanting things to be good – proves to be a storm-lashed crossing at night towards what dispiritingly looks less and less like a safe harbour.

Kieron Barry
2017

STAGING AND PRODUCTION NOTES

In rehearsal, the principal questions asked by directors and actors are the most sensible and obvious: where are these characters as they recount and relive their experiences, to whom are they doing so and why? The text offers no answers. Like running down stairs, the play works until one starts to wonder how.

(The only other regular question concerns the shard of glass in Scene 5. Again, the significance of this is not clear beyond giving a brief sense of uneasy premonition.)

Almost no stage directions have been included in the text. Directors must feel confident in fashioning the play to their own vision. The staging may be kept abstract and undefined, reflecting the opacity of the characters' location. Alternatively, with sets or tableaux, a more solid world may be illuminated either throughout or in glimpses – the fall from the bridge, for example, or the boy under the surgeon's knife.

Handel's *Eternal Source of Light Divine* is referred to at the end of Scene 16. Directors are strongly advised to include a substantial section of this short work. It stands almost in lieu of an interval, creating a moment in which the play is briefly suspended in mid-air. The recording made by trumpeter Tine Thing Helseth and soprano Isa Katharina Gericke is particularly recommended, the trumpet and voice heartbreaking in their counterpoint.

A NOTE ON THE TEXT

Simultaneous dialogue is indicated by the “/” symbol.

Tomorrow In The Battle received its world premiere on 17th August, 2012, at the Stageworks / Hudson theatre in Hudson, New York, in a production directed by Laura Margolis with the following cast of characters:

Simon	Timothy Deenihan
Anna	Celia Schaefer
Jennifer	Danielle Skraastad

WITH THANKS TO...

The author wishes to thank all the actors who made such valuable contributions to the development of the play, especially Tamsin Greig, David Morrissey, Danielle Skraastad, Alexander McConnell and Allison Threadgold. Likewise thanks are due to director Sophie Lifschutz, dramaturgs Ella Wrenn and Adrian Fear, and producer Anna Murphy. Thanks also to Portland Stage in Maine and Kitchen Dog Theater in Dallas for their workshops of the play.

For Chris and Elizabeth

CHARACTERS

SIMON – male, perhaps 50s

ANNA – female, perhaps late 40s

JENNIFER – female, perhaps 30s

The action of the play takes place in
the present day, mostly in London.

Scene One

SIMON Matt has already made it across and is waving like the pissed-up tosser he is from the other end of the bridge. Shouting the usual nonsense. He's done that thing of pulling apart his bow tie, partly to prove he's a rebel, but partly – by showing it's real, not one of those pre-tied ones – to prove he's part of the establishment.

By the time we'd left the Formal we'd got through seven bottles of wine between the three of us. And now here we are. Midnight at the bridge.

It's Oscar's turn, and I'm after Oscar. He gets up on the railing thing, a thin sort of parapet, and already he's a bit unsteady. I say, "Look. If you run, you're less likely to fall off than if you walk, 'cos you'll be more scared and alert."

Which I still think is logical.

The bridge is about a hundred foot long and it's about a hundred foot above the water. But tonight it looks as though the drop goes on forever. The parapet itself is about eight inches wide.

Oscar's getting ready, but then he flashes me a look of total fear, he looks about twelve. He doesn't belong with us, really, Oscar. I remember him crying at a Floreat dinner once. Not hunched over and sobbing or anything, just sitting upright with a face-full of tears, God knows why. People around him throwing bread at each other, ignoring him. But we're the big boys, Matt and I, it's still a case of that, even at medical school if you can believe it. And I really do think he likes us. For whatever reason.

I look at him up on the bridge and I want to say, This is stupid, we're just being stupid, let's just leave, let's go home, and I want to pull him down and give him a hug – I'm serious – and say everything'll be OK, just stick with it, you'll have a good life, you don't need the approval of idiots like us.

That's what I want to say. What I *actually* say is, "Just hurry up and do it, will you."

I turn away, to suggest contempt, and I hear his steps start up – off he goes, the clip-clip of his dutiful stride – until, about halfway across, the rhythm dissolves into a tight clutch of semiquavers, the scuff and scrabble of his grooveless soles on the grainy shine of the asphalt, and I turn and I see his arm jerking out, jutting and elbowy – out goes the arm and I realise he's afraid of landing on the concrete of the bridge, that's what he's worried about. The horror of falling to his left, falling *off* the bridge itself hasn't even crossed his mind, and so he leans back the wrong way, out over the water, way out, and for one second nothing moves except his feet against the parapet, trying to hold on as if they were hands.

And then down he falls, headfirst and backwards.

Scene Two

ANNA Some evenings, before we go out, Simon will say: “Please don’t tell them your job is making nuclear weapons.”

His idea of a joke. We don’t *actually* make them. (I *think* he knows that.) We just buy them from the Americans. But it is frustrating, telling people, and the first thirty seconds of every conversation are always the same. Hiroshima, mushroom clouds, Dr Strangelove.

I say: “We’re not the Ministry of Attack. We’re the Ministry of Defence.” They’re not interested, of course.

The entire British nuclear arsenal is carried by four submarines. We’ve no missiles on dry land. They’re all out at sea, under the water, patrolling the world. Each submarine carries four missiles, and each missile contains twelve warheads, and each warhead can kill about thirty million people.

The intention is not to *use* these missiles. That would be unimaginable. Yes, they’re *designed* to be used, and they’re *capable* of being used, but they’re a *deterrent*, in other words they only exist to stop other countries attacking us.

Now obviously if they’re to be an effective deterrent, other countries really must believe that we intend to use them, and that’s why frankly we *have* to intend to use them.

I know that’s confusing: being able to wipe out any country on Earth makes the world a safer place. But it’s true. It does.

Scene Three

SIMON I'm superstitious. Most surgeons are. On a good day I save someone's life. On a bad day I kill them. So it makes sense deciding each morning which foot's going to touch the ground first.

If I have to operate that day, Anna will massage my back for twenty minutes first thing. The truth is I don't need it, but I think she does. She says it's to relax me, she says she can see me starting to tense, but in fact she's seeing me start to concentrate, starting to become unsurprisable.

She's careful to warm the oil first with the heat of her palms, not wanting to make me jump. I patiently wait for her to finish, and when she does she turns me on my side and lies behind me, knotting her fingers together at my stomach.

People don't need to *be* beautiful. They just *are* beautiful. I tick off Anna's quirks one by one, all her odd, loveable confusions and embarrassments.

I look at her hands, soft and useless. And I think of the scalpel, cold and knowing and doing such good.

You don't *really* save anyone's life. You just keep them going for a few more years. They're carrying around the wrong heart, the heart of a stranger. They know it doesn't belong.

The patients all die prematurely, but so do the surgeons, in our case because we start so late. All surgeons are inexperienced, even the old ones. We have such a short distance between starting out and slowing down. It's like medieval love, which they say flowered with such intensity because puberty and death were separated by such a small gap.

I'm now in the golden hour, though, with everything at its peak. This started last summer, when I famously transplanted the heart of a baby, a baby just ten hours old, with a heart the size of a peach stone.

Scene Four

ANNA I was up in the attic. (We call it an attic.)

I'd fallen asleep downstairs earlier, quite by mistake, and I had that confusion you get when you wake up and it's starting to get dark. I wandered up here and sat down and opened a few boxes, pushing my hands into the papers and lifting a few at random as a child does with autumn leaves. They're all letters, letters to me. From grandparents, friends, names I've forgotten, although their letters are fizzy with excitement about seeing me next term.

Simon has kept no letters, but makes up for this with other heirlooms. He has a Nazi pistol that he used to keep up here with a whole trunk of other Second World War stuff. It's a Luger which his stepfather had almost unbelievably commandeered off a German officer in North Africa – I say unbelievably because this was a man so mild he wouldn't start his airline meal until all passengers had been served.

When his stepfather died, Simon took the gun from the attic and put it in his bedside drawer. I knew this was his way of trying to be close to him, but he never admitted this, it was just a private little thing he did. But I wanted to be included, so I asked him: "Why are we keeping an antique pistol in the bedroom, darling?"

"In case of civil war," he said, and kissed me.

Outside the light was decaying, the exact time of day Simon and I would walk at his parents' house in Dorset, that trapezoid in our history when he was still at medical school and I was finishing my PhD. The fields, our muddy wellingtons and cold ears, piling back to the farmhouse and the smell of toast, and him running his hands over me in the woody, Aga'd kitchen, telling me how beautiful I am. "Stop it," I'd say, "they could come in at any minute."

Now, in the blackening glass, I see I'm looking old. I've left the radio on downstairs, and as I listen to the music I hug

my knees and imagine how the camera would start spinning round me in the film version of my life.

Oh yes, I was beautiful once.

Scene Five

SIMON It was Anna's idea. She got the tickets from work. But then she rings and says she's running late, and *then* she rings and says she's not going to be able to make it at all. "I'm already here," I said, "what am I supposed to do?" "Just try and enjoy it," she said. Enjoy it? It's an opera. I've been up for fifteen hours and it hasn't even started yet.

So there I am in Floral Hall.

And a woman walks in.

JENNIFER Here's why I'm here.

Last night started out fairly normally. Was bought drinks by some dude in a bar in Farringdon. Bit of a strapper, good chin, could have been from Australia. Or the West Country. Somewhere like that. I gleefully braced myself for a night of lovely working-class sex.

And so it was. He knew he was out of his depth socially, bless him, although I'll give him this, he could sustain an erection in front of an intelligent woman, and how many can boast that? I couldn't help noticing, though, he started swearing halfway through. "Oh fuck! Oh shit!" Why are you swearing? What we're doing is already X-rated. If you want sex *and* profanity why don't I just shoot myself in the head as well? Get a bit of violence in there too.

However. The strangest thing happened when I booted him out afterwards. Normally when they stagger off I exhale and rejoice, free at last to chew gum or snore or eat anchovies straight from the can. But not last night. Last night I panicked. I'm sorry. I did. No one was around. I realised no one was ever around.

I looked out at East London's ambiguous, replaceable sky, and I recalled that line from Pavese: "No one ever lacks a good reason for suicide." I filed the thought away, in the kind of place you keep job offers you've turned down over the years.

I also remembered Goethe's last words: Mehr licht. More light.

I was about to file those as well, when I suddenly thought, hang on; I'm crying. I'm actually crying. I hadn't cried since 1994, which for me was that year at school when your nose starts to grow and no other part of you does. Bugger me that was an awful time; I just turned up one day with a honk like Bill Clinton's. I thought: if my tits were growing like this thing I'd be the ruler of this place, but there you go.

I'm Head of Global Sales and Client Service. I got a scholarship to St Paul's, five As at A-Level and a Star First with Biochemistry Prize from Imperial College London. I need someone with a bit of heft, someone craggy and established, someone who wouldn't look out of place with a baton on the cover of a *Deutsche Grammophon* record. I'm tired of changing people. I want to be changed. I want someone I can be afraid of.

That's why I'm here.

SIMON There's that moment when Christ spins round and says, Who touched my cloak? And they say, Well, we're in a crowd, everyone's touching everyone. But he's right. There's two hundred people here coming and going, but when she walked in it was as if someone had opened an orange.

And with the confidence of the truly knackered I think: I'm going to talk to her.

JENNIFER When people look at me they tend to look at me in *this* eye. But you've gone for *this* eye. It does make a difference, because no face is symmetrical – the brain assembles a symmetrical face using just the half it's looking at, so someone will look completely different depending on which eye you look into.

SIMON After a few moments I lean my hand on the wall behind her, so she's almost nestled against my arm. I ask her about her work.

JENNIFER It's a two-person firm. I'm the mover, Alex is the shaker. Or should that be the other way around? The point is this. He hired me to go out and shake the hands – oh, yes, so I'm the *shaker*. Impress the new clients. They like me. I think because I'm a girl. In the financial sector we're almost as popular as money.

Alex is a trader. He started in the eighties as a go-between at the New York Stock Exchange. Now he's here, and he's brilliant. Investors want an eight percent return. Alex generally gives them eleven. And they say thank you.

I move around Europe – oh, so maybe I *am* the mover – hunting down funds, ushering in the flow of money. I'm client-facing and gregarious, the kind of girl hedge-fund managers and high net worth individuals love to sit next to. Men who've sold the nineteenth century family business and now need some advice on what to do with the hundred million. Men for whom it's not "*fi*-nance', it's '*f*'nance".

But that's not me. That's just what I do.

SIMON Later, I take my seat as the house lights pale and the music starts. I begin to wonder what it means – what music means. Nothing, presumably, but I try to focus on it, see if I can follow it, if there's some sort of argument I can make sense of. But I can't, it's just a series of sounds, and they only mean what they are.

Scattily she'd torn a bit of paper off and written her number on it. In the darkness I feel the ragged edges of it with my thumb. Easy enough to rip it up, chuck it away and off she goes, thrown untraceably back into the infinity of London.

JENNIFER That night I wake up and feel something odd in my mouth. When I take it out I see it's a piece of glass, just a very small little triangle of broken glass. Yet as my tongue scans my teeth and gums I detect no trace of blood.

Scene Six

ANNA I am the bearer of bad news. So bad, in fact, that I close the door behind me.

It's just me, and Sir Adam. And an oil painting of Sir Adam. So here goes.

"There's a problem with the hardware. Could be a big problem."

This is the plan to renew our nuclear deterrent. It's what my career is all about. The one big event I was born at the right time to play a major part in. Updating Trident. In simple terms, the missiles are obsolete and they must be replaced. Parliament's approved our proposed budget, and we've agreed the sale with the Americans.

Except it's not so simple. I've just noticed an incompatibility in the match of one of Lockheed's systems to ours. Doesn't sound like a big deal, doesn't look like a big deal. But we have bought the wrong system, and we should have checked. In three months we give evidence to the Select Committee on the final costs. Should be a formality. But that was when it only cost one hundred and thirty billion. Now we could end up spending *real* money. And that's the kind of mistake that ends careers.

Someone should have noticed it, someone should have thought to ask. One of those things that's no one's fault, it's just everyone's fault. But there's only one man at the top.

When Sir Adam hears this he crumples, he can already hear the portcullis slamming down, locking him out of the one big remaining job – Cabinet Secretary. And he'll be doomed to roam Whitehall, an outsider with the mark of Cain. The man who bought the wrong missiles. The man who should have checked.

But he pulls himself together. That's the kind of man he is. "Who else knows about this?" he asks me.

"No one. Yet."

“What would happen,” he asks, “if we gave the old figures to Parliament?”

“We... I don’t understand.”

“Later on, when it’s all gone through, we could always just say the Yanks never told us. Their fault.”

“But it’s going to come out eventually.”

“Sure, but that would be down the line.”

By which he means when he’s already in the top job.

But that would mean lying to Parliament.

Sir Adam looks out over St James’s Park and thinks for a bit.

“Why don’t you go up to the Clyde,” he says. “Have a look at things first-hand. You’ve never actually seen the fleet, have you?”

Scene Seven

JENNIFER We have to meet for lunch near his work. That's how important and busy he is. It's a small restaurant on Rugby Street, off Russell Square. I get there first, and sit in the banquette facing out. Half the people in here must be doctors. It's probably the safest restaurant in London to start choking in.

A man approaches me, and I think it's him, but it's not. He's impressive, though, and so confident that it takes me a while to realise he's chatting me up. I say "I'm waiting for someone," but he gives me his business card with his four initials embossed in very dark blue – M. R. L. K., and I find I'm beginning to like the small scar that runs across his left cheek.

He leaves, and I'm left alone. I'm reflected everywhere, in the mirrors that line the walls, in the chrome of the lights, the shine of the cutlery, the bowls of the wine glasses and the curve of the bottle.

And I say his name three times: Simon. Simon. Simon. And he appears, and I feel something leap in my womb.

SIMON John Lennon's killer said that before the shooting he was waiting outside the Dakota building, and half of him was praying that Lennon would come back so he could shoot him, and the other half of him was praying that Lennon wouldn't come back, because if he did he knew he'd shoot him.

That's what it was like trying not to phone her, that's how it felt trying to walk away from the phone, until it was in my hand, not to call her but to return it to its cradle after I called her. That's how it happened.

JENNIFER I had bought him a pair of cufflinks from a small shop in the Burlington Arcade. What was I thinking? I just had this urge to spend money on him. I then took them back about an hour later, but then I changed my mind again and

bought them back. So I have them with me, gift-wrapped in my bag, but as soon as he arrives I realise the whole idea's stupid and I don't get them out.

SIMON I tell her I don't drink at lunchtime. True, but not the whole story. I don't actually drink at all now.

JENNIFER I insist on paying, and as I look for my card he sees the gift-wrapped cufflinks and says, "What's this? Presents on a first date?" And I realise he's joking, he assumes it's not a present, it can't be, why would it be? It's not even a date, of course, and so I immediately say it's my little niece's birthday, and he says "Oh, what have you got her?"

And I say: "Cufflinks."

Later that afternoon I throw them into the Thames, but as I do so I manage to convince myself that for some reason he can still see me, this is like an hour after we said goodbye at the restaurant, but I can't shake the idea off, so I make it look as though I'm tripping up, and then I have to follow it through and act like I'm disappointed that they've gone overboard.

Scene Eight

SIMON We don't know when we'll get a heart that he can take, so I sit him down and try to explain. It's actually easier doing that with children than with adults. They're credulous. He's ten years old, bright as a button. "So what's wrong with me again?", as if he were asking what time the party was. I take him through it.

"You remember the blood test? You passed that. Well done, you're through to the next round. The echocardiogram? Bing! You passed that too. Round three: the electrocardiogram. Full marks – on to the next level, Super Mario. Remember the cardiac catheterisation? Yet another pass – nothing can stop this kid now. And finally the heart biopsy – he's done it!

"What this means, my friend, is that you have something very rare called restrictive cardiomyopathy. That means that your heart – a muscle – isn't working properly, and it's not filling with blood in the way that it should because the walls inside the heart are too stiff.

"Things in your body that are meant to work for you actually sometimes work against you."

"So I'm basically fighting myself," he says.

"That's right. Now I know what you're asking – what's my prize? Well, the prize is – wait for it – a brand new heart. That's right; we're going to send you to sleep, open you up, pop it in, wake you up, and off you go! How does that sound?"

"Where's it going to come from?" he asks.

"Well, we'll take it from someone who doesn't need it any more."

"What if it's not the right size?"

"It will be, because we'll take it from someone just like you."

“Why don’t *they* need it?”

“Because...they’ll be dead, I’m afraid. Unlucky for them. Lucky for you.”

But the boy doesn’t get it. “Why would a *child* be *dead*?”

Scene Nine

ANNA I spend quite a bit of time imagining an alternative me, one that set off from the same point at the same time but made different decisions. A me that went to Oxford instead of Cambridge, that has all the same strengths but none of the weaknesses, that appears effortless and makes no mistakes.

The main attribute of this other me – the me that could have been – is that she's married to a colleague of Simon's called Matthew. That's the key difference. And she and Matthew have the most astonishing sex life, making love wildly every day or at least as often as I can come up here to the attic when Simon's not back from work yet, listening out for his key in the lock. I generally try to wear wool on these occasions, just a woollen jumper or something, which is cosy and makes me feel cuddly but which also has a certain scratch to it.

The literal part of me insists that I have to imagine everything through from the beginning, how we met, how Matthew arrived first instead of Simon, and so my eyes locked with *his* instead, and it all spins out from there. Actually, sometimes Simon doesn't arrive at all, we never meet, and in fact sometimes it's his parents who never meet, and he was never born, or they do and he was, but he was killed in the war. Desert Storm that would have to be, I suppose.

But anyway now it's just Matthew and I, and we live on the Cote d'Azur, from where he commutes in to Monaco every now and then. And there's a delicious irony, in that because of Matthew's international reputation and vast wealth no one would ever guess that once in the bedroom he effectively becomes my slave – he's there to serve me and me alone, and he instinctively knows that, and each time he not only fulfils my whim more completely but anticipates it more swiftly.

My goodness he's a magnificent lover, never tiring nor growing old, and on this occasion Sir Matthew hasn't even had time to undress, so urgent is my desire, he's still in