

Japanese Tourists
By Lexie Elliott

“Want to go blow up Japanese tourists?” asks Pete, his pale blue eyes blinking earnestly down at me behind his glasses.

Pete shares a study with me in the Theoretical Physics Department of Oxford University. Actually, two Petes do. This one is Bonkers Pete. He is carrying two large thermos flasks and a carrier bag that looks to be filled with empty two-litre coke bottles. Dave and Andy, also from the department, are tagging along behind.

I shrug, but I fall in beside Pete’s stork-like figure. I know that it looks like I am the odd one out in this rag-tag bunch. For starters, I am female. I do not look like my bedside reading is the *Journal of Physics*. Men on the street eye my bare legs below my summer skirt as we walk. Still, I know I fit in just fine.

I have heard about, but never seen, what I am about to witness. In summer, the tourists are such a pervasive presence that their validity as a target is taken without question. I am almost certain that Pete’s animosity is towards tourists in general and the racial reference is merely because so many of them do happen to be Japanese, but I don’t ask. For the sake of credible deniability at a later stage, it is probably best if I don’t ask any questions at all.

We trek through the University Parks to the picturesque stone bridge within it. It is the kind of weather that fills you with the certainty that no place on earth can better the south of England on a sun drenched summer’s day. In the past, men went into battle fuelled by memories of days like this, laid one upon the other until they became solid, something worth fighting for. There is a cricket match taking place in the Parks. The whites shimmer in the heat haze, achingly bright against the verdant

lawns, and the sound of polite clapping drifts over to us. The cricket seems like a detail too far, tipping the scene into parody.

We look over the bridge, down into the water that is chequered drunkenly by sunlight and shade. There are two punts heading our way, distinctive in their long flattened shape. One has half a dozen students in it, possibly exchange students; there are no undergraduates here in summer. The other contains a young couple. The expression on the face of the young man who is performing the propulsion work, feeding the long wet pole through his hands only to have to drag it out of the mud and repeat, reveals that he is finding it harder work than he had anticipated.

We wait. Bonkers Pete lines up the empty bottles. Someone has duct-taped rocks to them.

“Where did you get the nitro?” Andy asks him. Soft-spoken Andy is a street-luger. It seems to involve throwing himself down steep traffic-laden roads on a tea-tray on wheels. I do not recall why Pete, rather than Andy, gained the moniker Bonkers.

“Jim Bandstead. He got it from Chemistry.”

“Jim’s taken up golf,” Dave offers. “Thwacks balls with a nine iron from the balcony of his room. If he gets it right they plop straight in the river.”

I can see Pete digesting this. “I don’t have a balcony,” he says at last.

“Nor any skill with a nine iron,” I point out.

“Potential incoming,” says Dave.

We all look up the river. Much too close to the bank, a family of five on a punt are weaving their way haphazardly through the low-hanging willow fronds. The punter is bent double, contorting himself to avoid colliding with the branches. He

almost loses the pole as he lurches backwards to evade a particularly obstinate hazard. Japanese tourists.

“No good, there are kids,” says Andy, disappointed.

“Kill ‘em before they grow,” grunts Pete, but he doesn’t move.

“I’ll time it,” Dave says. He likes to feel integral, important. He makes a show of pressing a button on the over-crowded face of his wrist-watch. I turn and put my back to the wall of the bridge, resting my elbows on the stone. A large crow has settled on the wall on the other side. It remains in profile, remarkably still. I look at its feathers. They are black - absolute black, not an amalgam of dark shades that we like to call black. I think of my grandfather. He was a kind man, a man with jowls which shook when he laughed at his own stories. At the end he lay on his back in the thin single bed, his jowls and his stories melting away. The beaky profile that was left matched that of the crow.

“Thirty five seconds from the oak tree,” Dave says. “River’s slow today.”

We wait.

“Here we go,” says Pete with quiet satisfaction.

I turn from the crow. The colour was all wrong anyway. My grandfather was not a black-and-white man. He was an engaging man, by which I mean he engaged. He appreciated, even celebrated, all the shades of grey in life.

The punt Pete has singled out has six middle-aged Japanese in it. Three couples, perhaps. The men are stocky and have baseball caps perched precariously on their heads. The women have cameras and expensive rucksacks and enthusiastic smiles. The man who is doing the punting with an expression of slightly desperate concentration is wearing a Pringle polo shirt and navy shorts that are too tight. His

thicket legs finish in white sports socks pulled up almost to the knee. I wonder why he took off his shoes but not also his socks.

Pete is moving towards the thermos flasks.

“Not yet,” cautions Dave.

“I know, I know, I’m just getting ready,” Pete responds testily.

“About now?” asks Andy. Dave nods. Pete unscrews the top of one of the flasks. A thick white smoke appears, curling down slowly to the ground as he pours the contents into one of the empty, rock-encircled bottles. He screws the bottle top on tight.

“Now?” he asks Dave.

“Now.”

We watch as Pete casually lobs the bottle over the side of the bridge into the water. It sinks. The punt approaches, meandering somewhat but generally close to the bank, on course for where the bottle went in. I look into the water, straining to see past the reflected sunlight to the plastic bottle below, but my eyes cannot penetrate the surface.

The punt is getting closer. The Japanese women smile and laugh, oblivious, swapping bird-like sentences. I estimate at least twenty seconds since the bottle went in.

Dave looks at his well-endowed watch. “Anytime-”

The water under one side of the punt erupts, like a depth charge has gone off. Which it has, essentially – the rapidly vaporising liquid nitrogen has built up an explosive force inside the enclosed bottle. Shrieks erupt from the Japanese. Their punter is caught off-balance; in his consternation, he makes the mistake of holding onto the pole, not the punt. For a second he hangs comically, stranded in the middle of

the river, his legs wrapped round the thin wooden pole, before he admits defeat and drops into the water. In the meantime it becomes apparent that the punt has taken on a lot of water; the two men in the punt bark desperate, ineffectual orders at each other before one of the women finds the oar and they paddle to the bank. The punter is sloshing his way to the same bank, his expression a mixture of affronted disbelief and anger.

It is, of course, hysterically funny. We hunker down behind the bridge balustrade and then sprint from the scene before we can be identified, the adrenaline adding to the hysteria. By the time we reach the gate of the Parks we have slowed to a walk.

“Did you see-”

“Jesus, we practically SUNK the thing.”

“Do you think we holed it?”

“Could have been the weights...”

“We’ll be reported for sure if we did.”

“No-one will know it’s us.”

The hilarity is beginning to wear off. I wonder what will be left behind. I suppose I should feel appalled. It is, after all, an appalling thing to do – to depth charge perfectly innocent tourists. But I find that all I feel is sadness. I see the face of the punter. I imagine that he and his wife saved for this, to be able to take a trip round Europe, fifteen countries in twenty-one days. They wanted to take home pictures of themselves boating in Oxford, to be able to say – look, this is me, here I was. Punting. I cannot imagine that they will show photos from today now.

Once through the door of the department, we disperse to our separate rooms. Bonkers Pete drops into his chair in the study we share, the thermos flasks at his feet,

his long legs sprawled. Someone else must have the other empty bottles. He looks at me, but he doesn't say anything. I settle into my own seat. I look at my screen, then back at Pete. His earnest eyes are still fixed on me.

"I'm okay," I say. "Really."

He cocks his head. I sigh.

"Okay. Not really."

"When is the funeral?"

"Next Tuesday. I'm going to get some stuff done before coffee-break, okay?"

He nods. "Okay."

"Okay."

I turn back to my screen. I check my email but beyond that my concentration fails me. I think of all the doctoral students and fellows sitting in this building. We are theoretical physicists. We sit in our tiny non-ivory, not-tower studies and scribble with pen on paper, or tap away at our keyboards in code. We describe *systems* by *Hamiltonians*; we describe problems as *trivial* or *non-trivial*; even our approximations are quantified – *second order*, *third order*, higher. We know how to apply *quantum field theory* to the *Ising Spin Model*. We know all this – I know all this. The language we use is clear and clean, the numbers precise. Lately I have struggled to see how it can possibly fit the world around me.

The 4pm coffee-break arrives before I have made any progress. Attendance is strongly recommended, for students and fellows alike. Oddly, it has emerged that a lot of work gets done at coffee-breaks. Problems are aired, possible solutions floated freely. Cross-discipline collaborations suddenly take root on the two large blackboards. Sometimes, though, we just talk. When the subject is not academic, I find the company very restful. On the whole, nobody cares how they are perceived.

Or at least, they don't care about popularity - they have long since given up on that. They don't care if other people are popular either. It occurs to me that such tolerance can remove the onus to make an effort. To engage.

Today, the topic has turned to autism and Asperger's Syndrome. There is a spectrum, apparently; everyone lies somewhere on it. Inevitably in a department such as ours, I see eyes slide involuntarily left and right. Nobody looks at me. Nobody deems my own social struggles worthy of a syndrome.

I do not want to go back to my college room at the end of the day. There are other things I could do, places I could be, but those possibilities do not pull me in. Instead I wander to a café not far from the department and stare into a smoothie. I try to think of what my grandfather would have made of today, of the event with the Japanese tourists. He would have found it funny, I am sure. He would have laughed his gleeful belly laugh at the sight of that stocky tourist in his white socks clinging to the punt pole. But then he would have bounded down the river bank and helped to pull the poor bemused chap out of the water. He would have shown the tourists the bottles and the liquid nitrogen, he would have let them have a go themselves, and then he would have taken them all out to tea. He would have made it all a great joke that everyone could have been part of. It would have become a story the Japanese would have told over and over again back home, with affection, about those *crazy English in Oxford*. I find that tears are falling into my drink.

As I prepare to leave I see a Japanese couple at the table next to me. The man has a camera in his hand and is stretching out his arm to try to get a photo of the two of them together. Uncharacteristically, I approach.

"Would you like me to take a picture of you?" I ask diffidently.

They nod enthusiastically. I take the camera and click. The man looks excitedly at the digital picture I have taken.

“You are student here?” the woman asks me in stilted English.

“Yes,” I say. I start to shoulder my bag to go, and then I stop myself. “I’m doing a doctorate at the Department of Theoretical Physics.”

“Oh,” she says, her eyes comically round, questions welling up within them. Today, I think, I will answer them.