

A Man Passes

*I'm standing alone, I'm watching you all,
I'm seeing you sinking.*

The Stone Roses

Den of idiots, thinks Bender, who has forgotten how to cross a dance floor without being constantly jostled and trodden on. It's not the behaviour of these people that surprises him, but the time of day; it's too early for hysteria. Bender turns to the DJ's console. Behind it is a milksop who could do with being told that playing the B-sides of hits ten years older than you doesn't make for an original set. For that you had to buy yourself rare items and spin the A-sides, and most importantly, you had to know how to mix. But Bender says nothing; just stops in the dancing throng. He gets a faceful of long curls, which disgusts him, even though they smell good. It used to smell of smoke; now it smells of human and cosmetics. Human more than cosmetics: hair, skin, breath, sweat, must. All around Bender, people are shrieking and whistling and flinging their arms in the air. He is amazed. Has this B-side become a club hit thirty years late without his noticing? Fog rises, strobe lighting begins to pulse. Basically, nothing has changed, he thinks briefly. But recognising some gents in suits as men of his age and friends of his, he realises that certain things have changed after all. Two women in long dresses hail him as they push past. 'Yoo-hoo, Bender!' 'Evening.' He's been naked with the first, and once, very long ago, he would have liked to get naked with the second. She's holding a bottle of champagne by its neck, swinging it with such gusto that it hits Bender's chin. 'Oops.' 'No worries.' Plenty of worries, you silly slut, but what can you do? Bender rubs his chin. Dressed in a backless evening gown, Engelhardt's ex, Isabel, is standing so inertly in the

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through that Bender has to take her by the shoulders and shunt her aside to get past. It occurs to him that he hasn't seen Engelhardt yet. 'Hello, Izzy, any idea where the old bastard is?' No reaction from Isabel, who continues to talk at whoever it is she's buttonholed. It's too early for that kind of carry-on as well.

There seem to be two conflicting dress codes: 'Come as You Are' and black tie. *La Grande Bellezza*, Bender thinks, as glitter rains down from the ceiling – best disco scene ever. The bloke in the film is sixty-five; that makes us almost young. He plods stoically through the shower of glitter, submitting himself to being further jostled and spilled on. His suit needs to go to the cleaner's anyway, and gin and tonic doesn't stain.

He's in the gents' for the second time, wondering what the hell he's doing here, when two women squeeze into the next-door cubicle. Briefly he considers going out and coming back later, but then decides to stay. He hears fumbling and giggling. The dividing wall doesn't reach to the floor and he finds himself looking at a pair of shoes that at first make no sense to him, and don't impress him any better when they do. Oblong wooden boards with two heels under the middle of each foot. Geishas wear shoes like that. Bender doesn't know how he knows that, but he assumes that geishas have beautiful feet, whereas these toes are lumps of upturned flesh which have had toenails like drastically undersized crooked windows pressed into them. The other woman is wearing black boots. Bender could live with that – not that either of these women is any of his business. He tears his gaze away from the feet, stares at his own shoes, folds his arms and waits.

'And what sort of party is this other do later?'

'Lachner's girlfriend and somebody else are celebrating their joint ninetieth.'

'Two people or three?'

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'Good question. Two, I presume.'

'Christ, they're all so old...'

Bender raises his eyebrows.

'Hello? Frankie's almost forty.'

Bender nods, amused.

'With blokes it's different.'

Ralf Bender, forty-eight, registers relief.

'Shall we bike there?'

Bender looks at the geisha shoes again. The lumps of flesh are moving, as if they were doing the talking. Grotesque. The toilet is flushed, briefly drowning out the woman's voice.

'The old bag on the bar thinks she's Madonna.'

On the bar? Bender catches his breath. At the bar?

'Boah, sad. Mutton dressed as lamb.'

A metal object falls on the tiles.

'Oh jeez.'

'Jeez jaws menopause.'

There's giggling, sniffing, coughing. The toilet is flushed again. Zips rasp, the door opens, clacking heels retreat. Bender sits down on the loo seat.

'Peekaboo!' A moonface peers over the dividing wall between the cubicles. Its bun is perched plumb in the middle of its head, making Bender think first of an apple, then of William Tell, and then of William S. Burroughs, who accidentally shot his wife to death in a drunken attempt to imitate Tell. The face is chewing a piece of gum and eyeing him cheekily.

'Hi,' Bender says. Being a gent, he's not going to justify his presence in the gents' loos. Moonface nods knowingly. That too strikes him as cheeky.

'You all right?' Bender asks.

She casts a leisurely glance around the square metre of toilet cubicle and her eyes come to rest on the cistern, where Bender's Lufthansa Senator card is lying – his expired Lufthansa Senator card.

'Tip-top, thanks.' Bender had not expected more of an answer from her. He withstands her gaze. He'd like to let this saucy girl know who he is. Then he could get on with what is commonly referred to as flirting. In Bender's case this is a subtle departure from his normal behaviour, perceptible to only a few women, which makes it just the ticket for him. Bender doesn't like it flowery; he likes it to the point – and of late very rarely. If this woman should turn out to be the one clattering around barefoot on geisha boards, even the most non-committal attempt to flirt would be nipped in the bud.

'Serafina?' her friend calls. Moonface winks at him and vanishes.

Behind the bar, two girls are moving quickly and ineffectually. Bender waits; he isn't in the mood for pushing and shoving. He'll get a beer, because he doesn't like having less than a finger of vodka drowned in a bucket of tonic water on which a filthy, pesticide-drenched slice of lemon is floating, such as one of the girls is just now sawing off with a blunt knife.

Bender's modest attempt to get high in the loo has brought on what he privately thinks of as the 'Pinocchio effect'. His mind is racing around inside a wooden body, watching itself think. He gives a cursory nod to a few familiar faces and imagines the conversation. Yeah, doing well. Soon be underway – or just in the can, as the case may be. Congrats. Thanks, and how about yourself? Why don't you come out and see us?

Sure, when the weather picks up. What else? Bought a boat, run the marathon, finally found a decent osteopath, Whatsherface has moved to New York, Thingummy and Bob have separated, project up and running, kids growing up, move looking likely, taxes a pain in the arse. Next! Abstaining from: cars, carbs, cholesterol, nicotine, intoxication.

Tonight's the night to abstain from abstention. The night for legitimate, purposeful excess in Engelhardt's honour. All the same, Bender doesn't feel like making conversation.

Not even with Reza, who is now pushing his way next to him and saying hello. Reza was Engelhardt's producer but isn't any more; Bender doesn't know the details and has no desire to hear them. Viktor comes and thumps Reza vigorously on the back. They seem so overjoyed, you'd think they'd found each other after decades of separation. Bender doesn't begrudge them their pleasure, even if it is violently at odds with his own mood. He'd hate anyone touching him right now.

Two women in their early twenties shove themselves between Bender and the bar. Girls' night out. He stares at another bun and a mousey brown mushroom above a shorn neck. Bender dimly recalls a time when women with shorn necks drove him almost out of his senses – provided, that is, they were wearing make-up and earrings rather than horn-rimmed spectacles. Bender misses his second chance of a beer. The girls push past him again, and two lads of about six foot six block Bender's view. He's stuck in an ever-growing surge of young people, unable to move and feeling isolated, but not bad. He can't remember being invited to fortieth birthday parties when he was in his early twenties.

As of recently, Engelhardt has no wife to spend a quiet evening with – and no wife to help him organise an event with style. So understandably enough, not wanting to be alone on his fortieth birthday, he reactivated his raver's reflexes and invited his old

friends to this booze-up, along with a bus load of younger folk for purposes of general revitalisation. The only thing distinguishing the party from your average night out in a club is the table of presents at the entrance. Bender left an excellent single malt there, and doubts that it will be sufficiently appreciated. What the heck. Still, he wouldn't mind a swig of it now.

He orders scotch, which the barmaid only finds after reading the label of every bottle on display, then measures into a shot glass and empties onto a mountain of ice cubes, which Bender makes a show of fishing out and slamming down on the counter. Beer or a soft drink would have been on Engelhardt, but Bender pays for the whisky, tipping extremely generously in the hope of confusing the barmaid, but without success.

An old friend of Doro, his girlfriend, gives him a big hug. Bender lays his Pinocchio arm on her shoulder and nods curtly.

'He-e-ey, what's up?' Ariane says, putting the ball in Bender's court. Bender never usually says 'Hey' but he does now. Then he nods several times, although he can't understand a word, at which she laughs and sticks up both thumbs. Nodding was the right thing to do. Ariane is beautiful.

A young woman joins them and looks about her bad-temperedly. Bender is just wondering whether Ariane, too, goes out with girls this age, when he remembers that she had a child before any of the rest of them. He adds about eighteen to 1996 or thereabouts and lands in the present. Yup, that's it. He can't remember the child herself; he only remembers the topic 'child'. The girl has jug ears peeping out from her long straight hair, far-apart green eyes and a mouth twisted with disdain, which she has painted dark red. The product of Ariane's relationship with a photographer, whose name you sometimes had to know, although Bender can't recall it right now, is a delicious creature, who seems just as ill at ease at this party as he is.

Ariane hands her daughter a drink. Bender raises his glass and Ariane pushes her beer towards it, laughing. The girl doesn't stir. Bender wonders whether she thinks clinking glasses is naff or has simply never seen anyone do it. She's wearing a black, asymmetrical garment that Bender would recommend to a gallerist in her fifties. She wants to look different from her mother – it's normal, he thinks, tolerantly. He hopes Ariane isn't going to insist on an inter-generational conversation, because the girl is emitting waves of scorn that are making him feel uncomfortable. And anyway, what would they talk about? School? Ariane starts to dance; her daughter sits down on a barstool, bored. Bender's lawyer Clemens bumps into him as he's pulled through the crowd by his girlfriend. He gives Bender a wave, sizes up Ariane's daughter, looks at Bender again and vanishes into the crowd. Bender wonders how people would take it if he went out with a sixth-former. When the girl favours him with a smile, he smiles back in relief – a reflex that instantly annoys him. Since when has he let a little madam like this make a fool of him? Apparently since now.

She needs a good spanking, Bender thinks and asks: 'Another drink?'

'No thanks, I've still got one,' she replies and says something in her mother's ear.

Ariane shakes her head at her smug daughter and holds a finger in front of her nose. Time for a veto, but on what?

Maybe the child wants to go to bed and isn't allowed. Ariane pulls Bender's ear to her mouth. 'Party...Neukölln...out of the question,' he makes out, and: 'No way!' which, unnecessarily, Ariane yells twice; he rubs his ear and looks at the girl, who is now almost crying, her superiority deflated. Ah well, Bender thinks, Neukölln will have to do without you. He has always had enough money not to have to live in Neukölln. Now he's no longer of an age for hype, which, as far as the newly hip area of Neukölln goes, seems to him no bad thing.

He thinks of himself. He too used to cruise the town on the look-out for the place to be – but without his mother, mind you. It was good and it's a long time ago. Now it's these kids' turn: Make something of it, drop all this backward-looking retro crap and do something to shock us – us, the one-time shockers. He interrupts his inner zeitgeist lecture and waves his thoughts aside with a sigh, caught by Ariane's daughter who studies him, yawning.

A DJ from a bygone era, but evidently still going strong, lugs his record case towards the dance floor, pulling a second one on wheels behind him. An old man on his travels. His raddled face gives Bender a cursory nod. The nameless child perches sadly at the bar, contemplating her black varnished finger nails. Children need to party without their parents, no matter how their parents party, Bender thinks, and for a second this observation seems to him a profound one.

The third time he returns from the toilets, he has had two brief conversations and made one attempt to dance. After jiggling and jaggling around the dance floor a bit, he had looked about half-heartedly for Doro and decided the Stone Roses were best danced to sitting down.

The weathered DJ holds out a schnapps glass to him. Bender drinks with him, enjoying the amicable silence as they stare at the dance floor as if it were the sea. 'They're on a completely different wavelength from us,' the DJ says in his ear, but, unlike Ariane, in such a way that it doesn't hurt Bender and that he can understand him. The DJ jerks his chin towards the crowd. 'I can't work out why they're in a good mood or aggro these days.' He points at the people dancing in front of them; Bender sees nothing that he hasn't seen before. 'God knows what they've been puffing,' observes the DJ, whose Dandy cologne is at odds with his scruffy appearance. Bender shrugs. What does he

think they puff? Chemical drugs? Meds? So what's new? It's not just that he's too lazy to ask; he sets no store by the veteran's theories. Bender doesn't like conversations about drugs; they bore him and they assume a habit that's none of anyone's business. 'One thing's for sure, though: they have totally different vibes from what we used to have. Brutal chavs one minute and cuddly hippies the next. Seriously weird.'

The DJ points again. Bender doesn't understand his bewilderment – had in fact always thought *he* was the weirdo – but nods. The bass is massaging his internal organs; at least the sound system's good. A man is giving his girlfriend's naked shoulder a good lick as she dances, a beautiful woman is dancing so drastically off the beat that it looks as if she were brain damaged, and two blokes are dancing at her, jostling two other women out of the way – good movers, both of them, but neither tall nor blonde. None of this points to a new dimension in drug use. Perhaps nothing more outlandish than a few beers – perhaps not even that. An unkempt boy takes a gulp of water from a plastic bottle and dribbles it into the mouth of an elaborately tattooed woman. 'And,' the DJ yells, pointing at the crowd again, 'they don't booze any more.' Bollocks, Bender thinks, there's always boozing going on. He thumps the veteran on the shoulder and goes on his way.

Less wooden, but still far from being a vibrant member of the party, Bender returns to the bar and orders another whisky. Ariane's daughter is now deep in conversation with Viktor and Reza; they look like three grown-ups having an earnest discussion. The men's faces, especially Viktor's, are glowing with interest. When Reza makes to introduce Bender to the girl, she waves him aside. What does that mean? Bender wonders. That she already knows me? That I'm a friend of her mother and therefore old? Uncool by nature? Do you still say 'uncool'? Bender shakes his head and chuckles to himself.

Next to him, Viktor's wife Natalie is trying to order a cup of tea and being punished for this blunder by the barmaid's obdurate incomprehension. 'They don't understand German,' calls Reza, who seems to know the score here. You could understand the word 'Tee' if you spoke English, French, Spanish or anything at all, Bender thinks. 'Detox,' Natalie screams. 'Right,' Bender says and decides to leave, but instead of making his way towards the exit, he allows himself to be sucked back into the throng.

Meanwhile the music has progressed to minimal techno and from there to disco classics. The people dancing inevitably look as if they're at an office party. There are balloons floating about – thanks, but no, thanks. What is this? People in 2014 parodying people from the nineties who have rediscovered the seventies? No, it's a straightforward lack of imagination. Bender cuts himself short, because he can feel that he's about to embark on the never-ending monologue with which he even manages to bore himself these days. Everyone who knows Bender is familiar with it, Doro more than anybody – Doro, the world's most patient woman. Where has she got to?

Bender paces back to the bar like a neurotic tiger. The events photographer greets him and comes to stand next to him. Then he politely asks him to step to one side and takes photos of Ariane's daughter, flanked by Viktor and Reza. She doesn't yet know that all these nights – climaxes and gruesome mornings after included – are going to end up blurring into one in her memory, but she does know that you have to suck in your cheeks for a photo, lower your chin and keep your gaze fixed a couple of millimetres above the camera. The only thing standing in the way of her career as a model, then, are her chubby cheeks.

Bender has done (indeed overdone) his duty at Engelhardt's party – unlike Engelhardt himself, who is nowhere to be seen. But that's his problem, and nothing to do

with Bender, who has decided to slip away unnoticed. He's just about to start searching for Doro in earnest when there's a clatter and a shriek at the other end of the bar. A dainty figure in a cat suit climbs onto the counter and whistles on her fingers. Bender proudly eyes her pert little bottom as she bends down and pulls Ariane up. Okay, just this one number, then we're going, thinks Bender in a somewhat better mood, catching the barmaid's eye and holding up his empty glass. The barmaid shrugs regretfully and points at Ariane and Doro. No, this performance must on no account be interrupted by the business of serving drinks. That goes for Bender too, who has been with Doro for almost ten years – Doro, who sometimes used to spell her name 'D'Oro', a habit that Bender had talked her out of along with the equally pseudonymous and no longer appropriate surname 'Sapporo'. D'Oro Sapporo alias Dorothea Conrady is a genius of movement. Her agility had attracted Bender immediately. He hadn't realised he was looking for a woman who would raise his spirits, but the first time he saw her, she triggered something inside him that felt so cheerful and ebullient that he had to have it. He wanted Doro's lightness and, contrary to popular preconceptions about the proper way to initiate a stable relationship, he got it without a lengthy phase of combat or courtship. Bender had seen her, made her laugh, taken her home, and out of that night he had made a relationship.

He switches back to the present. The bar is open again; Doro and Ariane seem to be dancing in a parallel universe. This party is so dysfunctional that even the age-old 'let's dance on the tables' idea does nothing to improve the atmosphere. But at least Engelhardt is here now, briefly infecting those around him with his whistling and clapping. Ah well, Bender thinks, lame bunch, best get out of here. He sees Engelhardt leaning on his crutches again after his brief effort to lift the mood and retracts his thought: Engelhardt really is lame; he'd completely forgotten. Much more worrying,

however, is his general state: Engelhardt the Brute is barely recognisable. His temporary injury does not seem manly or dashing; it doesn't even seem temporary. He looks as if he's lost something important – his mojo, Bender thinks, and searches for a word for Engelhardt's new found appearance. 'Nondescript'? At that moment, Engelhardt glances across at him and makes a victory sign. Poor bloke, he's a good type, Bender will go out for a quiet meal with him sometime soon. As for the others, he thinks, looking into the sluggish crowd again, they need to get going if they want to make anything out of this. If only for his sake, damn it; the man's sick and wants a party, so bloody well get on and give him one. He glances back up at the bar. When Ariane goes down on her knees and Doro straddles her, strumming an imaginary guitar, he is, however, inclined to think that less, in this case, would be more. He loves Doro's exhibitionism, loves to see his woman in the limelight. He really does – but not now. The routine is inappropriate; Doro should realise that. Instead, she kicks a glass off the bar, earning herself disapproving glances that she fails to notice.

Bender looks about him and has the feeling he no longer knows anyone. Next to him, Ariane's daughter has evidently cracked a good joke, because Viktor and Reza are laughing. Stop this crap at once, Bender thinks, as if they can hear him, as if he's in charge of what's going on. He meets someone's eyes. Apple-bunned Moonface is gleaming at him from a forest of torsos. She's smiling at him as if he's found an ally in a stack of lunatics. He feels provoked and somehow caught out and would like to explain to her that she's misjudged his situation: No, little girl, its not that he is unnerved by events like this; it's more that they get on his wick with their sameness and pointlessness, for Bender is usually to be found at functions of a higher calibre. He raises his whisky tumbler in her direction. Elder statesman, is that what he's trying for? Too late. She looks him up and down, while her friend screams in her ear, then she grins at

him and he attempts a smile. When she points her chin at the women dancing on the bar, raising her eyebrows in amusement, his tongue thickens. He suddenly realises who she meant by the old bag on the bar and looks up at Doro and back at Moonface, who coolly lowers her right eyelid while replying to her friend.

He sees Doro in a different light – in the light of this party. Doro is – and it's only natural – getting on a bit. The lamp she is dancing under mercilessly illuminates each year of her life. Bender doesn't know exactly what she does or pays to conserve her beauty, but he was always sure he was with an exceptionally timeless woman. She just hasn't ever changed her style, he thinks, but she has aged. Contemplating her well-formed profile, he is aware for the first time of a weariness that suddenly makes him sad. Then she turns to face him and Bender calms down somewhat, because her show face which is calling out 'Word up!' looks the same as ever. Her body too – perfectly proportioned, agile, petite.

He's never been interested in what women thought of other women, or why they waged war against one another while at the same time calling for greater solidarity – something that always seemed ridiculous to him. Here at this bar, he has for the first time been confronted with what younger women think about older ones. Maybe this young woman just happens to be more than usually bitchy, Bender muses briefly, and then decides that he's not going to bother himself with such matters any more. Doro should simply drop this nonsense and leave with him, this instant.

Frank Engelhardt is dancing on the spot; he waves his crutches above the crowd, affording a fleeting glimpse of his old self. Once, Engelhardt was one of Doro's admirers. Once. A few women are dancing around him; with their woolly hats, coats and beer bottles they look like tramps stomping around a burning barrel. Definitely not my style, thinks Bender, who feels as if he's in a crowd of identical people, the only one who

stands out from the others – the only one apart from this saucy bun girl, who’s still eyeing him up. She has the insidious advantage of being aware of her advantage; at her age, Bender hadn’t realised the value of being young. He looks back and forth between the young, bored women and the older, keyed-up ones like a spectator at a tennis match and tears himself away from his ponderings: Don’t take this crap seriously. Bad party, lousy coke, stupid people, soon be over, who gives a fuck? The problem isn’t Doro, Bender thinks; the problem is these kids, whose would-be coolness contrasts unfavourably with her enthusiasm. Unfavourably to Doro. Bender’s gloom persists stubbornly. Doro is just getting into it again, jiggling about as if charged with electricity, when Moonface girl appears at the bar, swings herself onto the counter and begins to dance. Bender has the impression that now everyone is staring at this girl, who is wearing crocheted hot pants and – very wise – boots rather than geisha flip flops (which must, consequently, be adorning the feet of the woman who is in the process of unbuttoning Engelhardt’s shirt).

Doro and Ariane seem pleased at the new turn of events, although the enormous girl reduces them to background dancers. Doro assumes her favourite facial expression: big eyes and a pouty mouth. Bender, who realises for the first time that she makes herself look stupid on purpose – as ostentatiously stupid as the stupid women in a silent film or at the circus – is now seriously annoyed. Ariane just wants to be sexy and stay sexy, and it looks as if she might succeed – good luck to her. Doro, on the other hand, is relying on a tactic which is long past its sell-by date, and this disturbs him so profoundly because he’s never noticed it before, although he has in fact always known it. To Bender’s distress, now gathering like a storm, it feels as if he’s discovered a flaw which she has been concealing from him and whose revelation is all the more abhorrent for that. Bender glances in the bar mirror and then back at his girlfriend. He recognises

himself, but he no longer recognises her. He doesn't see a stranger (which, being as absurd and fleeting as this event, might be preferable); he sees someone he was once close to and no longer is – someone he hasn't seen for a long time and who has grown away from him – an old acquaintance, making an exhibition of herself. And because, on top of everything else, he's in a frame of mind that makes him see each of his thoughts not as a thought but as a quotation worthy of publication, he sums up his musings: Doro is an old child. Coming to him in his current state, here at this event, the realisation is so unbearable to Bender that he wants to cover his eyes and ears at the same time. Instead he thumps on the counter and waggles his empty glass at the two dimwits behind the bar.

Women over forty are not cute; if anything, they're beautiful, Bender decides, still in aphoristic mode and wishing he could paint the slogan on a sign and shove it in Doro's face. He would like Doro to wipe that sugary pout off her face and stop making a fool of herself in front of all these kids; he would like her to act her age and, more than anything else, he would like to be in a bar with decent service. The other question is who Doro's exhibitionism is aimed at – not, it would seem, at Bender, whose presence at the bar she doesn't even seem to be aware of (no eye contact, no smile); no, here is a woman pointlessly squandering herself, *blowing* herself – there's no other word for it – on nothing. It's all so devastating that Bender almost forgets to breathe.

Miss Moonface jumps off the bar to applause. Doro and Ariane have lost all touch with the rest of the room and continue to dance to no acclaim to an audience that is treating them like go-go girls. Bender is turning to go when someone taps him on the arm. 'Pear schnapps or plum?'

Reza is counting heads like a teacher on a school trip. 'Wait till the old girls are finished,' Ariane's daughter counsels him, grinning so smugly that Bender, who would

usually describe himself as a gentleman, decides that now would be the moment to give her a good hiding. One of the objects of her derision up there on the bar is her mother – another disaster, but luckily not Bender's. 'Let me past,' he says, once again cleaving fantasy from reality by pushing the girl aside with exaggerated gentleness. The word *past* sticks in his head. *Past, past, past.* Let me *past*, you fucking losers. *The past is past.* And he pushes his way on towards the exit, feeling like a seer among blind men.

When Bender steps out into the night he is somewhat more reconciled. He thinks of the veteran DJ and congratulates himself on choosing a job that doesn't force him to spend his old age hanging around in clubs. Each step towards his car brings him a little nearer to his habitual frame of mind. He'll leave the car where it is, but it's comforting to see it. Hello, what's this? Stuck to the windscreen beneath the wiper is a parking ticket which he instantly tears to shreds, briefly furious again at everyone contriving to complicate his life – and right now that really is everyone, including the taxi driver who ignores his outstretched arm. *Past.* He'll complain to his next passenger about the lack of trade. Bender sets off on foot, inhaling the cold damp air and briefly pleased, without knowing precisely why.

Two blocks further on, pregnant with history, but no longer visible, the Wall separated Mitte and Kreuzberg, and Bender has to pee against a hoarding. He reads the glaringly lit developers' and architects' sign advertising apartments with river view – a river that is rather less spectacular than the sign makes out. As he is putting his trousers to rights, deep in thought, a car draws up beside him. Okay, Bender thinks, as he gets in, here's a woman wanting to give me a lift: makes a change, and about time too.

So, tell me about yourself, says Moonface, as she puts her foot to the floor. And as Bender starts to talk, something inside him yields and everything that comes out of him, all his stories and opinions, are suddenly exciting again and new.