

Heads-When, Tails-How C.S. Barnes

I.

On the first night, he's wearing all black. He's thin, charity-advertisement-thin, as though someone has draped tissue paper over a Halloween mask. When he smiles, I worry that his paper-face will start to tear at the edges of his mouth. But it doesn't, and I guess he'd be the first to know whether that was about to happen.

'What's in it for you?' the person queuing in front of me asks.

He shrugs. 'Heads I win, tails you lose.'

I turn away and walk home then. I'm too old for games that are rigged, I decide.

II.

On the second night, he's wearing all black again but from underneath the hood of his jumper I can see what I think is a red bandana. From the patterning around the edge, it looks like a red version of a black one I own. I wonder if it's weird that we have the same taste.

There's less of a queue this time and the people who are there he gets through quickly. He doesn't seem to be mind though. His paper-body is folded into a darkened corner like human origami. From his slouch it's impossible to tell how tall he is but I suspect if you unfolded him he'd go on forever, and ever, and—

'You were here last night.'

I look around.

'There's no one else,' he adds. 'They all ran away.'

'Did you scare them?'

He's flicking something up in the air and catching it. When I close the gap between us, I can see it's a coin and I wonder if that's the coin he uses. It lands heavy in his palm and I think about his paper-skin again.

'Me? I never scare anyone.'

'That's not true,' I say, and he exhales heavy through his nose in an almost-laugh. I'm sure I hear the air rustle against paper-nostrils. The girls I went to senior school with would die to be that thin. Some of them probably have.

'People are scared of the idea of me,' he says. 'I'm actually a nice guy.'

He flicks the coin again.

'A nice guy who kills people?'

The copper edge of the coin collides with the concrete beneath us. He looks at me and I feel as though the ground will crack open. He closes his paper-palm, rubs his fingers together and flicks another coin into the air.

'People mostly kill themselves.'

III.

'Tomorrow?' the person in front of me says. 'Like, tomorrow?'

'I'm afraid so.'

'There's nothing I can do to stop it?'

The paper-man shakes his head and I'm sure I hear a rustle.

'How?'

'You asked for when.'

'But—'

'No but. You asked for when.'

The person in front me turns and spots me. He starts to feel around in the pockets of his coat, with an urgency, as though his life might depend on it. When the hurried search has finished, he's pulled together what looks to be a twenty-pound note, a five-pound note, and a handful of change.

'I can pay you,' he tells me. 'I can pay you if you'll let me take your turn, your flick.'

The paper-figure unfolds from his corner and he's taller than I expected him to be. He closes his hand around the coin and uses the fist to tap the man in front of me on the shoulder. He turns around so I can only see the back of his head again.

'If she doesn't want her turn, I can have it, right? That's allowed, surely?' he asks.

The paper-man shakes his head. 'I'll see you tomorrow.'

IV.

On the fourth night, he isn't here. I stand in his spot for a while in case he manifests – or whatever it is he does. I balance my foot flat against the wall behind me to mimic his pose, but I know that I haven't got it quite right. Still, I try to imagine the power; the sensation of standing here and knowing everything but doing nothing. I pull a fifty-pence coin from the front pocket of my jeans and say, 'Heads or tails,' to the wind, before I flick the coin and let it land on the ground beneath me. I wish I'd had an obol to offer.

V.

He's leaning against the wall in his usual style. Pinned up in the space next to him is a sign that reads, 'Closed for business.' I see the flicker of the coin travel through the air and land in his paper-palm and I wonder whether the sign is a lie.

'You're not here to work?' I ask.

'Not technically. I'm in trouble with the boss.'

'The boss?'

He nods toward the sky.

'The boss-boss?' My voice is excited, and I can't swallow it. He laughs at my reaction.

'There's no boss,' he says. 'There's just a man in the upstairs office and a man in the downstairs office. Don't over-complicate it.'

'Which are you?' I ask.

'I'm more of an independent contractor.'

'Who isn't closed for business?'

He shakes his head. 'I came here for you.'

My eyes widen and I feel a muscle spasm in my throat. He laughs again.

'I didn't mean it like that.'

When I don't say anything he asks, 'Do you want to go for a walk?'

'Where?'

‘Anywhere.’

It’s a silent agreement that passes between us. Using the foot that’s flat against the wall, he pushes himself into a standing position. In two strides he’s next to me and we turn to walk in the general direction of the high street. It’s where all the kids go.

It’s strange, the comfort that sits between us, as though keeping us a safe distance from each other while allowing some familiarity. Then I remember what he said about not over-complicating things.

He flicks the coin as he walks, talks. ‘Why do you keep coming to see me?’

‘Because I think I want to know.’

‘But you’re not sure?’

‘Is anyone ever sure?’

He thinks about this for a second. ‘People are always sure until they get their answer.’

‘I think that’s what worries me. What if I ask for one and then need the other?’

‘There’s no what if,’ he says. ‘You will. People always do.’

‘Why do you let people do it then?’

Something must catch his eye because he stops a few steps behind me. When I turn around, I see that he’s looking at what used to be Woolworths – before the crash. A lot of the lettering has fallen from over the doorway but those of us who are familiar with the town still recognise it for what it was.

‘I like being able to help people,’ he says.

‘You think the coin helps them?’

‘I think it would help to know when and how things were going to happen.’

‘But you aren’t telling people when and how—’

‘You humans all want to know more.’ He takes three strides to bring himself level with me and his paper-nose is nearly touching mine when he says, ‘Isn’t a little enough? Isn’t being able to prepare for one even if you can’t prepare for the other, enough?’

We fall back into our silence then. I’m not sure how long for.

‘Which would you choose?’ I ask.

‘I don’t have to choose.’

‘No, but if you did.’

He’s quiet for a while. Minutes. ‘How.’

‘Why?’

‘Because.’

‘That’s not fair.’

He takes two steps ahead and halts in front of me. He opens his arms wide as though preparing to catch the sky. He’s as wide as he is tall, stretched out like that. ‘Nothing is, Eleanor. Nothing ever has been in the history of the world.’ When he closes his arms, he takes a step toward me. ‘I’m just trying to give you a leg up.’ He pulls the coin from his pocket and holds it between his index finger and thumb. The side he’s holding as the word ‘HOW’ written in bold and capital letters and I wonder whether he’s trying to tell me something.

VI.

‘You’ve made your decision?’ He doesn’t look up to speak. He’s inspecting the coin.

‘I want to know how it will happen,’ I say, my voice frayed with nerves.

‘How?’

‘Yes.’

‘You’re sure?’

I narrow my eyes at him. ‘Is it the wrong decision?’

‘Well, you can always let the coin decide.’

‘That’s what everyone else does and I’ve never seen anyone leave happy.’

He smiles. ‘You expect to leave happy?’

‘Will you tell me how?’

If he doesn’t tell me how now, or soon, then I’ll change my mind. It crosses my mind that he knows that and that maybe he’s delaying this so I do change my mind, which makes me wonder whether *when* is the better option of the two and I’m about to verbalise these wild theories when—

‘There will be a boy, a young man. Michael, Mitchell, something along those lines.’ He shrugs. ‘I don’t suppose his name matters. He’ll tell you he isn’t all that drunk, but he is. You won’t see him sink the last two beers at the party, which is why you get in the car with him. There’s a rabbit, badger, something along those lines.’ He shrugs again. ‘You shout, because you see the animal before he does. He’s wasted, his reaction times are all off. He’ll swerve but he’ll overshoot it and the car will collide with a tree. He’ll make it out; you won’t.’

I feel as though a giant has pressed oversized hands either side of my ribcage and pinched me. My bones are too tight, or my lungs too large.

‘You need to breathe through your mouth,’ he says, so I try that.

My breath is laboured when I ask, ‘What if I don’t get in the car?’

He smiles. ‘In every version, you always get in a car.’

‘I don’t understand, what do you mean by—’

‘In every version. Whether it’s Michael, or Mitchell, or Dave.’ He pushes himself away from the wall and comes to stand in front of me. He sets a paper-hand on either of my shoulders and I feel as though I might collapse underneath him. ‘You okay, kiddo?’

‘I’m going to die,’ I say.

‘We all are.’

‘Not you.’

He smiles. ‘Maybe not me.’

‘I should go now,’ I say, and I shrug his hands off me. ‘Thank you, for everything.’ I can’t bring myself to look at him. I feel as though something dirty has passed between us now; a fumble, an awkward kiss, something that should never have happened, but still. He doesn’t say anything when I step back from him. He just lets me go. I turn and pace away, my steps as laboured as my breathing, and I wonder how long it’ll take me to get home.

‘You take care of yourself, Eleanor,’ he says and then, quieter, ‘I’ll see you in fifteen years, give or take.’

I don’t know whether I’m meant to have heard, but I keep walking.

C.S. Barnes is an author, poet and academic from Worcestershire, UK. She has had two crime novels published (*Intention* and *Copycat*, Bloodhound Books 2019) and a number of pamphlet and chapbook publications alongside this, mostly recently: *Death is a Terrible House Guest* (The Black Light Engine Room Press, 2019) and *Go on a Road Trip* (Wild Pressed Books, 2020). Barnes also works as a Creative Writing lecturer at various institutions around the West Midlands.