

NOTES on the 'missing' Chapter 3.5 for JG Ballard's novel *The Drowned World*

"Soon it would be too hot." is the first line of *The Drowned World*.

In the world that Ballard has created, inexplicable solar storms, some 70 years prior to the action in the book, caused the environmental cataclysm that has resulted in major flooding and rising temperatures. Only the North and South poles are deemed still inhabitable.

The main character, Dr Robert Kerans is a 40 year-old biologist who was born and raised at Camp Byrd, a UN run facility in Greenland. He comes to submerged London on a biological survey led by Colonel Riggs.

The only female character is Beatrice Dahl. She is only vaguely sketched. In typical Ballard style she is described as beautiful and slightly mad. He refers to her as both Eve and the serpent to Kerans' Adam. It is implied that she and Kerans are lovers. All we know for sure about her is that she was raised by her (un-named) eccentric, art collecting grandfather because her parents died shortly after she was born and that she has already started having the nightmares that will soon plague Kerans.

We first meet Beatrice in Chapter 2, day 1 of the story. Kerans tells her Riggs is leaving. She makes it clear she doesn't plan on going and asks Kerans to stay. He is non-committal but there seems to be a tacit agreement.

We next see Beatrice early on the following day in Chapter 4. Kerans pops in and finds her drinking whiskey for breakfast and her air-con is out.

I've written a Chapter 3.5, set just before Kerans arrives in Chapter 4, that gives Beatrice a bit more back-story and highlights her resilience and self-reliance. (Somehow the men never seem to wonder how she managed on her own all those years!)

TC

The Penthouse Pool (a 'missing' Chapter 3.5 for JG Ballard's novel *The Drowned World*) by Tracey Clement



Beatrice, as we find her in the novel, reads like a character custom built to be played by Karen Black in her 1970s prime. Graphic by Peter Burgess.

Beatrice was awakened by a trickle of sweat pooling between her breasts. It was very hot, moist and dark. Covered in sweat and still caught in the throbbing, murky realms of her dream, Beatrice wasn't sure at first where she lay. But slowly, semi-

consciously her mind filtered through its sensory information and decided that the soft, damp tangle she was sleeping in was the sweat drenched sheets of her bed, not a nest of leaves on the ground. She wasn't outside, not any more.

Armed with the knowledge that she wasn't in any immediate physical danger, Beatrice's mind let itself be drawn back down into its own treacherous depths, lured and lulled by the mesmerising reverberations of her own heartbeat, mirrored in the pulsations of her nightmare sun.

When Beatrice next awoke a few hours later, it was by a fully formed thought. 'The air conditioner is on the fritz.' It was even hotter now and there was no mistaking where she was this time. Although the light had a greenish tint, filtered as it was through the leaves of the enormous gymnosperms outside, its dappled quality was geometric, sliced into oblique lozenges by the Venetian blinds of her penthouse apartment twenty stories above the waterline of the lagoon.

Beatrice lay in bed and considered fixing the generator to get the air-con going, but decided against it. It was only in the mid nineties inside and besides Robert would probably pop in later.

She decided to let him do it. He enjoyed the pantomime of looking after her, overtly displaying his masculine prowess in such manual tasks. Smiling to herself she thought, 'Who am I to deny him such a simple pleasure?'

Finally deciding on a course of action, Beatrice got up, wrapped a black towel around her midriff in a concession to getting dressed and poured herself a large tumbler of whiskey. 'Cheers,' Beatrice said to herself taking a small sip and raising her glass, 'Here's to the end of the world.'

Of course the world had been ending Beatrice's whole life. By the time she was born the novelty of jet skiing through Hyde Park and punting to Piccadilly Circus had well and truly worn off. At first the rising temperatures and even the rising seas had been welcomed by an inland city used to indifferent summers and freezing winters. But the days of laughingly referring to London as the Venice of the North were long gone. Giant mosquitos, malevolent new strains of malaria and chronic food shortages made the joke wear thin. Most of the city's citizens had already heeded the UN call to move north.

Insulated by wealth and the influence it inspired, the Dahl family stayed behind. Beatrice's grandfather instinctively tapped into an almost genetically-coded sense of entitlement and slipped easily into his ancient ancestral role as the Duke of his own mini-fiefdom. But instead of a castle keep on a rocky promontory, he had a penthouse compound marooned in the jungle above a steadily rising lagoon. Served by a small but fiercely loyal band of neo-serfs, Bernard and his daughter Sophia lived the cloistered, dissolute life of the privileged.

Nobody expected Beatrice's mother to fall pregnant, least of all Sophia herself. Fertility had been in decline for decades. It could almost be measured inversely by the explosion of life elsewhere: the more the iguanas and alligators spawned the fewer human babies were born. Sophia's own birth had been something of an event and during her whole lifetime she had only ever met one other child. So when Beatrice was born twenty years later, Bernard declared it a Dahl household holiday. A quiet man of particular habits, he preferred to enjoy life vicariously through art, books and the pleasures of others. He gave all his retainers the night off and Sophia, too young,

elated and full of her own self-importance to be kept in her bed for long, the key to his well-stocked wine vault.

The next morning, Bernard found his daughter floating dead in the swimming pool, one hand still loosely clutching a bottle of his best champagne, the sequins of her dark blue evening gown winking like scales on a giant fish. Next to her was the bodyguard who Bernard had always suspected was Beatrice's secret father, his paternity finally confirmed by his futile attempt to save her mother from drowning. Neither had ever learned to swim.

Beatrice finished her drink. It was 6 am. She let her hand rest on the kitchen counter in a small patch of sunlight which had infiltrated the blinds; searing but not yet incendiary. She dropped her towel, opened the sliding glass doors and walked outside. Crossing the green tiles, Beatrice dove headfirst into the tepid, leaf strewn water and using strong steady strokes pulled herself through the same pool that had made her an orphan. The irony of drowning in an already drowned world had not been lost on her.

Later, lying back on a deck chair her wet skin drying rapidly in the oven-hot air and listening to the first raucous calls of the iguanas far below, Beatrice recalled catching Colonel Riggs leering down at her while she was in exactly the same position yesterday. 'Tiresome little martinet,' she muttered to herself. Beatrice had taken an instant dislike to the Colonel from the very beginning. He carefully displayed a kind of faux-paternalistic posturing, but she suspected his motives for wanting her at Camp Byrd were a little more pragmatic. She had heard rumours over the years of UN sanctioned breeding programs at the military run outposts in the Arctic Circle.

When Riggs and his testing station had shown up six months ago, the absence of any women in the crew had seemed to confirm these stories. Beatrice suspected that all the Camp Byrd ladies were getting busy at home: lying back, thinking of England, and vainly trying to keep the race going out of some misplaced sense of duty. Despite this, Beatrice didn't take the Colonel's appraising glances personally. In the time she had known him he hadn't shown any signs that he wanted to induct her personally into the reproductive program. His eyes

on her felt more like a farmer sizing up the merits of some recalcitrant breeding stock.

Robert Kerans' motives she understood were more complex. She had known for a while now that he had started to think of himself as some sort of symbolic reverse Adam: the last man instead of the first, sinking into the primordial ooze rather than crawling out. And yesterday he had inadvertently called her his Eve in a kind of backhanded compliment. She found his rangy strength, intensity and introspection attractive, but when they first met she wasn't immediately sure that they would become lovers. At thirteen years her senior, he could have just as easily cast himself in the role of father figure. From the beginning he had assumed that she was at best hapless, at worst helpless, and certainly in need of his protection. After ten years of looking after herself, Beatrice found she was happy to indulge this fantasy. It was hot. And she was tired.

Beatrice was seventeen when her grandfather died and the last of his loyal retainers fled north. She was alone. The design of the Dahl apartment had been shaped by a siege mentality. It held large reserves of food, fuel, and liquor, but

Beatrice knew that these were not inexhaustible. The first time she left the apartment and filled her lungs with thick, hot, humid air, felt the full force of the sun like a smack in the face, and squished the fetid wet silt at the edge of the lagoon between her toes it felt like a revelation.

She had experienced the outside before, but never alone and never so intimately. After a persistent, week-long campaign of needling her grandfather would occasionally allow one of his bodyguards to take Beatrice fishing or for a tour of the submerged city; always in the cruiser, safely shielded from both heat and danger. But with her feet on the ground and her senses assaulted, Beatrice found herself intoxicated by the heady fecundity and sheer power of the world around her. Up-close and personal, she was, for a time, utterly seduced.

Beatrice wilfully devolved. Shaded by towering plants, she burrowed into the cool leaves and muddy silt during the hottest parts of the day and slept, and restlessly roamed the city at dawn and dusk marvelling at the sublime beauty of a civilization crushed. At night, she tended smoky fires of damp wood, ringed by a perimeter of glowing reptile eyes. Then one

day, as if waking from a dream or suddenly shaking off an addiction, Beatrice no longer felt the need. She returned to the civilized luxury of her penthouse and only ventured out occasionally to look for supplies.

Along the waterline, the city had been thoroughly picked clean by the preceding waves of migration north, but Beatrice had discovered that few of these scavengers had been bothered to climb more than a few stories above the lagoon. The intense heat and the damp, fungus festooned confines of the stairwells in high-rise hotels, apartments and offices had proved to be a natural barrier. All she had to do was climb high enough. In the same way, by strategically disabling her own elevator, Beatrice had managed to avoid detection by the few stragglers she had seen pass through the lagoon in the decade before Riggs and his military circus came to town.

Dry now and beginning to perspire heavily, Beatrice returned indoors, re-donned her black towel and poured herself another drink. She still wasn't sure why she had let Riggs find her. Subconsciously she guessed she was tired of flying solo; she didn't want to be all alone at the very end. Riggs and his

soldier boys were leaving, but Robert would stay, she was sure of it. And so would she.

Beatrice absent mindedly surveyed the room: shelves stacked with books, 20th-century Surrealist masterpieces on the walls, and out the window the glassy surface of the lagoon; a white hot sheet of light refracting the relentless sun. Once again she was feeling its inexorable pull. But this time, instead of drawing her outside, the glowing orb had entered her dreams, bathing her nightly in its terrible aura, obliterating her, pulling her under. Soon it would be too hot.

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