



The Dreams Of
Bethany Mellmoth
BY WILLIAM BOYD



BETHANY Mellmoth sits under the awning of the Kafé Klee and looks at the traffic snailing by on the Fulham Road. Where are all these people going on January 2nd, she asks herself? Her friend Moxy appears with two double-shot cappuccinos and sits down. Moxy offers her a cigarette (Bethany accepts) and they both light up in the style of the Sean Young character in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*. They both agree, Bethany and Moxy, that no-one has ever lit a cigarette in a cooler way than Rachael, Sean Young's character, and this is a judgement based on long analysis of smoking scenes in key cult movies. Bethany, as it happens, thinks she is better at replicating Rachael than Moxy.

They exhale, blowing smoke strongly out of the sides of their mouths, and sit for a while sipping their coffee. Bethany likes the Klee, not simply because of the half-dozen reproductions of the master's work inside, but also because it is cheap and you can smoke comfortably on the pavement under the awning thanks to the glowing orange heaters bolted onto the wall above their heads. She and Moxy are trying to come up with a list of achievable New Year resolutions, for this new year of 2010, and are stuck on the subject of sex.

Moxy claims she had no sex in 2009, something Bethany finds a little shocking, given that she, Bethany, had enjoyed so much – though on reflection perhaps the



word “enjoy” is the wrong one. Still, clearly she had many more sexual connections with men in 2009 than Moxy. This is also somewhat surprising as Bethany thinks Moxy is a very attractive girl in a slightly feral, grubby way. Bethany indulges in a short, clandestine thought-experiment – imagining if she were a man confronted by Moxy. Slim, vivid (the rusty-maroon hair contrasting with the pale face), fashionable, intelligent (Moxy dropped out of her Fine Arts degree at Edinburgh after a year) confident and edgy. What's not to like?

Being ruthless, Bethany decides that, if she were a man, she would be somewhat put off by Moxy's nose stud. It's on the large side, a stylised silver multi-petalled flower, but the tarnished grey petals are surrounded by a pink areola of inflamed skin, as if the tissues of Moxy's left nostril are reacting angrily to this piercing, as if cleanliness, basic hygiene, had not been part of the process. Bethany knows that Moxy had this flower inserted in her nose

over a year ago, in Goa, on her 21st birthday but it has never truly settled in its nasal location, its hot pink ring forever visible. Moxy says she feels no pain, the flower can be removed and easily replaced with no unseemly oozings but, all the same, there it is in the middle of her face and it gives off its own little aura of sepsis, of incipient purulence.

So, Bethany says, keen to move her mind on: what's your New Year resolution?

“I've got to get laid,” Moxy says, flatly. “Simple as that. That's all I want. Once that happens everything else can move forward.”

Bethany remonstrates – surely there must be other important ambitions? But Moxy won't hear of anything more high-minded.

“It's all very well for you,” Moxy says, with an edge of bitterness to her voice. “You lived with three men last year. Nympho.”

This hurts, but it's true, Bethany realises. She tells Moxy everything – well, almost everything – so Moxy knows about Sholto (and Sholto's betrayal and departure) and then Kazimierz and then Hunter (but not about Hunter's brother, Calder). Suddenly Bethany wonders if there's something wrong with her: she's only twenty-two but she lived with these three young men pretty much one after the other, all interestingly alluring and strangely sexy guys in their own special way, under different roofs. With each one the same routines and rituals applied: they slept



together in the same bed, they shopped together, ate together, went out together, did rudimentary housework together, paid bills together, each had a set of keys to the front door of their habitation – but one by one these relationships were unilaterally ended. Just for a moment, a few weeks, a month or three, some sort of stasis of contentment was reached. And then it went wrong and Bethany declared it was over.

“Any news of Sholto?” Moxy asks. Sholto was Moxy’s friend and she introduced him to Bethany. For nearly a year they shared a flat in Camden before Sholto abandoned her suddenly to go “travelling”, he said: to Namibia, Laos and Alaska – the destinations were very precise.

Deafening silence, Bethany says, for all I know he’s in Alaska with an Inuit wife. She smiles – to hell with Sholto – and asks Moxy if she’d like to hear her New Year resolutions. Moxy sighs and says, get on with it.

One, Bethany says, move out of my mother’s house. I can’t live there any longer. Moxy says that’s also one of her New Year resolutions –

after getting laid. Two, Bethany continues: undergo a period of deliberate celibacy – no men. “You bitch,” Moxy says. In order to (three) kick-start my acting career again, Bethany explains. “I thought you were going to be a photographer,” Moxy says. I’ll still be a photographer, Bethany says, I can act and take photographs. Like that actress, what’s her name, the one that was in the Woody Allen films. “Penelope Cruz,” Moxy suggests. No the older one – Diane something. Moxy doesn’t know who she’s talking about. And, four (a) and (b) get an agent and start going to auditions.

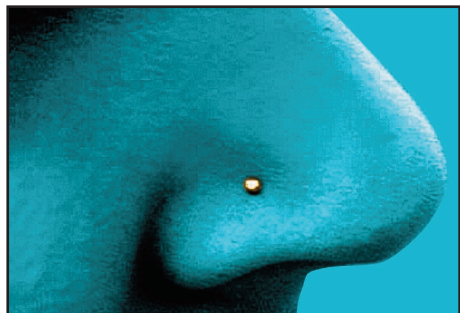
Bethany feels a sudden surge of optimism notionally laying out her future in this way. It immediately seems very realisable. Move out of her mother’s house, get an agent, go to auditions, be offered a part in a play/sitcom/TV drama/movie/commercial and begin to realise her dreams of acting on stage or screen – she’s not fussy. In fact she’s annoyed that she can’t be going to meetings with her agent and deciding what auditions she’ll do and what she’ll ignore. London is closed, she realises, England

is on hold, Great Britain is immobile while its enforced, enervating seasonal holiday plays out, interminably.

Of course, there is still the problem of money... Resolution 5: find a short-term, interesting, well-paid part-time job.

Sunil comes out from the cafe and Moxy asks for the bill. “On me, ladies,” he says. “Happy New Year.” Bethany likes his Liverpool accent. Moxy says she has to go as she’s “on air” at midday. She reads the news, weather and travel reports on a small digital radio station called Radio Lube. It doesn’t pay well but it is the media, at least, Moxy says. Her dream is to be a TV presenter or the host, or one of the guest hosts, of a TV show. Children, Reality, Quiz – she doesn’t care. She also works part-time as a website designer – she says she’s paid but Bethany doesn’t believe her as she’s still living at home with her parents in Wandsworth. Moxy hugs her goodbye, they promise to text each other, to meet up for a drink. Bethany watches her walk away – a pretty girl on the Fulham Road – surely the men should be queuing up?...

Sunil comes out again and sits down at her table. He has lank long hair and wire-rimmed specs that fail to disguise his good looks. “You got a second, Bethany?” he asks. Bethany says she has – she likes Sunil. Sunil starts talking about his band, the music he makes. “We got a couple of tracks on our website,” he says, writing down the





address. What's it like? Bethany asks. "Very electronic," Sunil says, "But not dance/hip-hop, you know. More electro-folk-modern-classic." Oh yeah, Bethany says, like chamber-pop. "No," Sunil says. "Nothing like chamber-pop. Listen to it, you'll see." I'll hear, Bethany says. Sunil looks blank for a moment. "Yeah, you'll see what we do." Bethany stands. Great, she says, thanks for the coffee. You should talk to Moxy if you want some work done on your website. "What kind of name is Moxy?" Sunil asks. Her real name is Araminta, Bethany says. Araminta Trinder – but she didn't like the way it nearly rhymed so she changed it. See you. She heads off but Sunil calls her back. He looks nervous all of a sudden, tucking his long hair behind his ears. "Can you sing, Bethany?" he asks. Bethany says, immediately, without thinking, yes, she can. Why? "We need a singer," Sunil says. "Somebody cool and beautiful, like you." Bethany narrows her eyes and stares at him forcefully, sceptically. Hey. At moments like these she knows she resembles her mother a bit. That look. "I'm dead serious," Sunil says. "I mean it. Come down to the studio – meet Sven. I've told him all about you. Give it a try. Nothing to lose." Maybe I will, Bethany says. I'll listen to your music – see if I like it. "It's very electro," Sunil says, almost plaintively. "We feel we need a voice."

Bethany walks along the

Fulham Road heading for her mother's house in Hollywood Road. We need a voice, Sunil said. Bethany sings out loud in a husky low jazzy monotone – I have a voice, a voice that can sing almost anything, do-bee-dad-dad-da-boo, yeah, yeah, I can sing for you, baby, any time of day, yeah... It sounds pretty good, she thinks. She's never thought of a singing career. Why not? Maybe Sunil and Sven are talented. Maybe their electro-folk-modern-classic sound could catch on. Bethany pictures herself on one of those late night television music shows. What would she wear? She would be very still, she thought, as she sang, holding herself immobile, concentrating on the song and its lyrics. She would write the lyrics, definitely. Sunil and Sven could add their music once she'd written the words.

She turns left into Hollywood Road and for an absurd moment thinks she sees Sholto across the road from her mother's house. She laughs to herself: get a life, girl. Then she realises – it is Sholto. Fucking Sholto, she says, out loud. Then, anger building in her like a mushroom cloud, she yells: SHOLTO!

Sholto looks round and

takes off, running up Hollywood towards Cathcart. Bethany is after him immediately, thankful that she's wearing flats, and quickly begins to gain on him – a fact made all the easier because Sholto is carrying two rucksacks, one slung over each shoulder. He skids into Cathcart and then begins to slow. Bethany catches him at the junction of Seymour Walk and pushes him against a wall, tears of pure rage in her eyes, wanting to strike him. "Don't hit me," Sholto pleads, in between huge gulps of air. They stand facing each other for a while. Bethany feels herself beginning to calm down. She steps back – Sholto looks different. He's wearing black, top to bottom: black Converse sneakers, tight black jeans, black leather blouson over a black hooded sweat-shirt, black scarf. Even his two rucksacks are black. He looks different, somehow. Then Bethany realises it's his hair. The wild tufts and waves have gone. His hair seems blonder, also, and it's swept forward over his forehead and onto his cheeks even, like a kind of hair-helmet, as if his hair is embracing his head. Bethany's not sure if she likes it that much. How was Namibia? she asks, her





voice reedy with cynicism. Or should I say Alaska? “I’ve been living in Amsterdam,” Sholto says. Oh great, Bethany says. Brilliant – so far away. Why Amsterdam? Bethany senses rather than sees the tears well in Sholto. He pinches his temples fiercely and shuts his eyes. She can see his knuckles whiten as if he’s trying to force his eyes together in his head to form one Cycloplan eye. “I’m sorry to get so emotional,” Sholto says in a small croaky voice, “but I think I’m gay.”

That evening after supper Bethany asks her mother, Alannah, if she knows many gay men. “Almost every man I know is gay,” her mother says, and starts to list them: Alasdair, Luis, Trevor, Kwame, Toshiro, Clive... Is Clive gay, Bethany asks? I thought he had a wife and two kids. “So did Oscar Wilde, darling,” says Alannah, thinking, “Well, he’s certainly bi. Whatever. In fact I thought your father was gay for a while after he left – but I was clearly wrong about that.” Alannah looks at Bethany shrewdly. “Why do you want to know?” I’m just curious, Bethany says and then, as casually as she can manage, asks: Have you ever had an affair with a gay man? “No,” Alannah says with a sigh. “I’m a het, through and through, alas. Sometimes I wish I were gay: life might be simpler, but unfortunately I’m attracted to the opposite sex and that happens to be male. Hetero man for me.” She looks at Bethany again. “Do you think you’re

gay?” she asks. No, Bethany says – Sholto does.

Bethany meets Sholto in the Cafe Klee. She decides she really does not like his new Amsterdam hairstyle. He seems more relaxed, more like his old laconic self. “I’ve found a flat,” he says with some pride. “Kentish Town: two bedrooms, sitting room, kitchen and bathroom.” Bethany asks how he can afford it. The last job she was aware that Sholto held down for more than a week or so was replacing and watering plants in office blocks, working for his brother. Sholto shows her – under the table – a big wad of money, blocks of Euros with rubber bands round them. Bethany does a quick count. That’s nearly 8000 Euros, she says. You’re not selling drugs, are you? “Giel gave it to me,” Sholto says. “He told me to find a flat. Had to put down two thousand pounds as a deposit.” Who’s Giel? Bethany asks quietly, suspecting the answer. “He’s my friend from Amsterdam,” Sholto says. Your lover, Bethany says. “Sort of,” says Sholto. “It’s complicated.” How did you meet this Giel? she asks. Sholto tells her: he was at Heathrow, that day he’d left her, trying to figure out how to get to Namibia. He started a conversation with this guy – an older guy, late 30s. He said he lived in Amsterdam, suggested that Sholto check out Amsterdam for a few days before he flew on to Africa – there were plenty of cheap flights from Schiphol.

Sholto shrugs. “I can’t really explain why,” he says, “but I went to Amsterdam with him and never left.” He frowns for a moment, then smiles. “Do you want to see the flat? You can choose your room.”

Bethany says she’ll think about it, somewhat astonished at Sholto’s nerve. Does he think this is normal? First he leaves her, just like that, walks out of their flat and their life together to go “travelling”. Then he doesn’t make contact with her for months, and then he turns up outside her mother’s house, tells her he’s gay and asks her to move into his new flat with him. Bethany steps outside for a smoke.

Sunil joins her. “Did you check out the website?” he asks. Yeah, Bethany lies spontaneously. I see what you mean about needing a voice. “Exactly,” Sunil says, with enthusiasm and relief. “You’ve got to come down to the studio.” Where’s the studio? “It’s in Sven’s flat, in Streatham. We’ve got everything we need there.” Bethany exhales. It’s only January 4th and the year is speeding up. What’s the name of your band, she asks? “Xenon,” Sunil says. Why Xenon? “Because it’s like a sort of cool distant planet,” Sunil says. Actually, it’s an inert gas, Bethany tells him, gently. We’ve got to get a new name, Sunil, I can’t be in a band named after an inert gas. “You think of a name, Bethany,” he says. “I know it’ll be great.”

Bethany walks round the flat in Kentish town. It’s



ground floor and the kitchen is quite new. She'll need to repaint her bedroom, of course, but it's not bad. Also there's a little tufty patch of back garden with an ancient apple tree – which is pleasing, as she's never really had a garden of her own. "What do you think?" Sholto asks. It's pretty good, says Bethany. "I've paid two months rent in advance," he says, "so, everything's cool, you know." Everything's not cool, Bethany knows, and she's about to say – what's the deal with Giel? – when there's the sound of a key in a lock and a tiny young woman comes in wearing a red leather coat and a red beany cap. Sholto gives her a kiss. "Hi," he says. "Noémie, this is Bethany." Bethany raises a hand and says hi. "Bonjour," Noémie says. "Excusing me, one moment." She whips off her beany cap to reveal cropped spiky blond hair. She's so tiny and frail she makes Bethany feel like a giantess. She darts into the bathroom. Who's Noémie? Bethany asks. "She's from Brussels, doesn't speak much English." Who's Noémie? Bethany repeats, patiently. Sholto runs his hands through his neat Amster-



dam hair-style, disarranging it. "She's Giel's wife," Sholto says. "She's staying here for a couple of weeks."

On the bus back to Fulham, Bethany goes through the pros and cons. Sholto said that they – he and Bethany – would share the big bedroom. As long as Noémie was staying there would be nothing to pay. Then she'd go and the flat would return to them. On further questioning, Sholto admitted that Giel might be popping over from time to time. He and Noémie were looking for premises to start a club. "I miss you, Bethany," Sholto had said, "I feel I need to spend time with you, make up," adding that he'd told Giel all about her. A "club", Bethany thinks. Maybe they'll play electronic music. Maybe she

and Sunil and Sven could do a gig there...

She looks out at the wet streets, her stop coming up, but the rain is over and the clouds are brightening, promising some sunshine. Maybe Sholto is right: it's a stroke of luck – moreover it solves all immediate problems and confirms several of her New Year resolutions. She and Sholto could share a bed, no problem, but that hair would have to go. Suddenly she freezes – she has it. An inspiration. The Promise of Sunshine. She likes that. Sounds good. She steps off the bus and walks up Hollywood Road. Her mother will pretend to be upset but will secretly be delighted she's leaving home again. Yes, it might work out, everything: Sholto back, the new flat, her resolutions already on the way to being achieved. She hears applause in her ears, shouts of acclaim, whoops, whistles... Ladies and gentlemen – finally they're here, what you've been waiting for, big hand, please welcome Bethany Mellmoth and The Promise of Sunshine!

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This is not the first time that Bethany Mellmoth has appeared in my fictions. In fact I feel she may be starting to take on a life of her own! I created her in response to the fact that I was becoming increasingly curious about the lives of my

nieces and goddaughters and their friends (whose ages range from 18 to 28). Looking at their young lives, and their dreams and aspirations, and thinking of my own young life more than a generation earlier, I saw how things had changed radically – and not always

for the better. And of course, at the same time, I also saw how nothing had changed at all. For some reason I felt impelled to give that generation of young women a distinct and idiosyncratic voice and so Bethany was born.

William Boyd