

In the jar

by Julian Gough

Adrift at sea, submerged in olive oil, all my bodily needs are satisfied, and I can dream



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Julian Gough was born in London to parents so Irish they both have the right to be buried on the Rock of Cashel. When he was seven, the family returned to Tipperary. At university in Galway, he began writing and singing with the underground rock band Toasted Heretic, which had a top ten hit in Ireland in 1991 with "Galway and Los Angeles," a song about not kissing Sinéad O'Connor. His first novel, *Juno & Juliet* was published in 2001. His second, *A Thousand Years*, will be published in September 2007. He is currently writing a play with the Gare St Lazare players in Paris and Berlin. Gough says he seldom deliberately writes short stories, though his novels are made of nothing else. It's a method drawn from Irish oral culture. "A man tells a story in the pub. His story sparks a story from his listener. A passer-by joins in with another story. Most of our best novels follow this structure."

ALARMS RANG.
I ran.
I ran the length of what turned out, unfortunately, to be a pier: and found myself at the end of it, surrounded by water. A yacht lay to my left, and a shed lay to my right. I looked at the yacht: voices came from it. No.

I threw open the unlocked door of the shed, entered, and slammed it behind me.

A little light came through the high, barred window over the door. It was a storeroom of some kind: foodstuffs, in enormous industrial containers. Giant sacks of rice, of coffee beans, of oats. Giant jars of pickles, of jam... Crates of tea, huge tin boxes of biscuits, bales of plastic straws, of serviettes, pallets of butter. They almost filled the room.

Climbing the crates of tea, I slid and crawled across the supplies to the back, and a row of vast glass jars. With great difficulty in the confined space, I unscrewed the lid of one, to reveal jam, almost to the brim: no use. But the next contained, by its smell, an oil: yes, the lid was stamped in black letters, "Extra Virgin Olive Oil: first cold pressing. Produce of Spain." There was a good gap between oil and lid. I slid slowly inside the jar. The oil rose, reached the rim, spilled silently over and flowed down the sides. I scooped more oil over the side, to create a breathing space, and I closed the lid. I tilted my head back. I had just room, between oil and lid, to breathe.

I GREW INCREASINGLY comfortable as my body adjusted to the temperature of the oil, and the oil slowly rose to my body temperature. I grew, indeed, a little drowsy, and almost slipped beneath the surface.

Exhausted, I decided to stay where I was. Here was as good as any place to rest mind and body.

I emerged only to improvise a long breathing tube, by ramming many wide-bore drinking straws hard into each other, in sequence. As straws of identical bore do not naturally fit inside each other, insertion was achieved by putting a slight crease, or V, in the tip of the straw to be inserted. With its bore narrowed, it slides inside the outer straw for perhaps an inch. The slight elasticity of the plastic means that a most satisfactory seal is made along a good length of the overlap. And so I made my little breathing tube, popping a discreet hole for it in the thin metal lid of the jar.

I plugged each of my nostrils with a single large coffee bean. Most pleasantly, the beans released a rich coffee fragrance. Indeed,

as the hard beans pressed into the soft moist flesh of my nasal membranes, I absorbed certain volatiles directly, across the membrane, and grew somewhat giddy: but as the volatiles were exhausted, it passed.

The dozens of cardboard boxes of wide-bore drinking straws were held together in their large bale by a thin, clingy transparent plastic sheet, shrunk to fit. Carefully, I unpeeled a long strip of it. I put a final straw in the corner of my mouth, pointing up, and wrapped the strip of plastic around my lower head, till my mouth was sealed.

I was suddenly struck by the unwelcome possibility of sneezing my beans loose.

A disagreeable prospect. I wound the remainder of the strip higher, and covered my nose.

I breathed easily and cleanly through the broad red straw. I mopped up my oily footprints, my handprints, my drips, as I retreated to my jar. I hurled the soiled tissues into the corner, and lowered myself back into the oil. Then came the tricky task of screwing on the lid, from below, and reassembling my breathing tube without filling it with oil. Carefully, I pushed the lengths of tube up out of the hole in the lid. My tube assembled, I slotted it into the straw in my mouth, pushed it tight. Exhausted after the long day, I sank slowly beneath the oil, my long tube descending with me. The nature of the overlaps ensured no join caught the edge of the hole on the descent. Weightless, in utter silence, free of obligation to self or world, I closed my eyes.

I slept the sleep of the immortals, or the dead.

WHEN I woke to a burst of light, it was to see a cook's face, under a cook's hat, staring in at me, distorted by oil and the curvature of glass. Reciprocally distorted, I stared back. And so we stared, for a while. I did not blink, or move. He did not move, but blinked excessively. Perhaps he had got dust in his eye, moving crates and boxes. For I now had a clear line of vision, past him and out the open door into sunlight. I read his lips through the distortion.

"Not again," he seemed to say. "Not again." The repetitions made me think I had it right.

A tranquillity had come to me in the night. Content in my weightless state, I could not bring myself to act in my own life's drama. And so I watched, unblinking, as men pulling steel trolleys entered, and removed the

crates and sacks and jars and bales and boxes.

First they came for the flour.

Then they came for the coffee.

Then they came for the condensed milk.

Then they came for me.

The light was too bright outside, even when filtered through the beautiful pale green oil, and I closed my eyes. How pleasant, the heavy drift of my lids through the oil, moving it, my lashes dragged through it, then halting, eyes closed, and the end of resistance. I forgot somehow to open them again.

There was a jostling, or a pressure wave through the oil as perhaps I was set down somewhere.

But I was half asleep, then all asleep, and I dreamed I was asleep and dreaming.



WHEN I awoke, it was dark. I floated, blind, deaf, dumb. The hiss of air through my straw, I heard. But, hearing it constantly, I did not hear it at all. When I woke again it was still dark, and I had the most terrifically pressing need to evacuate bowel and bladder. My penis was as large as I had ever known it, and more rigid than I could ever recall. There was no give in it whatsoever. Could I, indeed, get out through the narrow neck of the jar in this condition? I did not wish to soil my oil, but nor did I wish to leave the jar. I floated there, pondering, as unknown amounts of time passed, minutes perhaps, or hours.

The situation, however, did not remain static while I pondered it. Fluids within me performed their various functions and, molecule by molecule, the liquids I had done with found their way to my bladder. My bowel, too, continued to fill. Then there came a period of precarious balance: once all the food I had eaten had made its way to the far end of my alimentary system, the bowel situation began to improve: for the water, comprising perhaps half that waste, continued to be absorbed stealthily by the membrane of the bowels, thus lowering somewhat the pressure in my rectum and lower bowel. But that water, absorbed, soon made its way to the reservoir of my bladder, thus raising the pressure there. As a side effect, it stiffened my penis to the point of pain, for the enlarged bladder was constricting the outflow of blood from my penile root more than it was constricting the deeper blood vessels controlling inflow.

My urethral sphincter creaked.

The situation was growing intolerable. Soon my body would make a command decision, whatever my mind continued to think. I pondered. Despite my discomfort, the pleasures of my situation were great: yet, by failing to make a difficult and unpleasant decision now, I ran the risk of destroying my future happiness.

I surfaced; deconstructed my breathing tube; unscrewed the loosely closed lid; and climbed with a certain difficulty out of the jar.

I tilted my head from side to side, and the oil cleared from the bends and traps of my ears. The drums again made contact with the general air. How loud is silence! I was entranced by its richness. So different to the interior richness of deafness, to the bellow of blood through the body, the rumble through the bones.

This silence was so crisp, so clean, so light, so much more delicately textured. Most notably, it creaked. But it hummed too, at both ends of the sonic spectrum. Oh, all silences hum: but this seemed modern, almost electrical. Much muffled, far distant, were human cries. Then the loudest creak yet, and immediately after, and many orders of magnitude louder, a bang, grotesquely close. The silence had been so rich I had forgotten it was silence and had thrown open my senses excessively. I also appeared to have been hit, hard, as though with a plank, the full length of the left side of my body.

Sight! I thought. The very moment for it. Sight is a magnificent way to lower the volume of the world. The mind, when processing the vast, unending stream of the visual, assigns considerably less attention to the aural. I opened my eyes. What a sight. A magnificent darkness, too rich and complex to describe in detail. I shall not traduce it with a summary. Suffice to say I was on my side, and by ruthless logical interrogation of the darkness and the silence, I made clear my position. I was in a storeroom; in a boat; on the high seas; the semi-circular canals of my inner ear had, in the absence of vision, caused me to fall over.

How? Thus: the ship had rolled heavily to its right: I had reflexively hurled myself left, rather late, to balance myself: whereupon the ship had also rolled left, so that instead of balancing myself upright, I had thrown myself hard at the floor.

I stood, cautiously, feet wide apart, and groped forward as my eyes began to make better sense of the darkness. Then, shocking and wonderful, moonlight began to trickle, then pour, into the storeroom through a high small window as a cloud outpaced us, or was outpaced. Crates!

I urinated by moonlight into an open crate of Earl Grey tea. The liquid swiftly vanished, absorbed by the loose, dry leaves.

Solid waste was more difficult: thanks to the lengthy absorption of water, it had grown dense and compacted. An enormous jar of pickled whole cucumbers seemed my best bet. I opened it and, perched upon a pallet of tinned tuna, relaxed my anal sphincter. I

began to strain, but then I thought a moment, and repuckered. I reached down below me and took out a whole pickled cucumber, and ate it with a great hunger I had not till then realised I owned.

Another.

And another.

With the pickles devoured, I returned to my task, and voided into the pickle jar. My waste floated, indistinguishable, to the casual glance, from the cucumbers. I replaced the lid, and returned with relief to my own jar. Pipes behind it, in the corner, warmed my jar, my oil. Back below the surface, deep in the warm oil, I closed my eyes.

I WOKE AND slept.

I dreamed, and I did not dream. Occasionally, I left my jar to excrete and eat. But this I did less and less as time went by.

I soon discovered that I could drink the oil in which I dreamed.

Unplugging my breathing tube at the first joint, I would pinch the disconnected tube closed, so as not to fill it with oil. Dreamily I drank as much oil as I liked through the straw in my mouth, and reconnected the breathing tube when I was done, sucking the last oil down the straw to clear it.

This became my habit.

As it both satisfied my hunger, and produced very little waste, I found I left the jar less often.

Eventually, I was producing chiefly liquid waste. Nothing solid had emerged for several sleeps. And so I arranged a second tube, from my penis, up through the lid, and discreetly down into a crate of Earl Grey at the back of the stack.

Back in the jar, urinating uphill was difficult, but once the urine first crested the jar lid, and began to flow downhill, gravity was again my friend. The siphon effect made subsequent urination effortless.

And so I could spend the timeless days submerged in my jar, deaf and blind and ecstatic, eating and breathing and excreting with no effort.

Rarely, there was the sensation of strong light on my closed lids. The door had been opened, and no doubt the cook or a sailor took tea, or tuna, or toothpaste from the stacks, and left. The sensation of light ended. Stored safe and high, at the far back, with other jars of oil in rows ahead of me, all the way to the front, I knew they would not bother me, and I did not stir or fret. In time I slept through their visits, unless it is that they began visiting less often.

THEN I noticed that the surface of the oil was dropping in the jar: for I was taking my sustenance from inside the jar, yet excreting my waste outside the jar, thus lowering the reservoir.

There was nothing for it but to raid another jar of oil, for to give up my bliss was unthinkable. Already the top of my head was occasionally exposed to the

air, as I moved at the bottom of the jar in my shrunken bliss. And so I raided another jar for oil.

THE LID put up stiff resistance, but the issue was never really in doubt: I had opposable thumbs and a burning desire for oil. It was only a lid. With a satisfying pop the air gushed in, the lid was off, and the oil was mine. Using pipes and containers, I carried the oil to my jar.

I filled my jar as high as I could and still fit in it. And by it I enjoyed great quietness; and the taste of it was the taste of fresh oil.

And I drank my oil, and waxed fat, and no torment touched me. I was content, slumbering in my jar.

But at length, this oil too ran low, and I was forced to seize upon another jar and suck it dry of oil. And all the time my wastes were filling the cases of tea, the sacks of rice, soaking the dried biscuits and the Ryvita crispbread, so that it was crisp no more.

Until the day came when, having pissed and shat in everything, I finally ran out of oil.

I left my jar a last time, and laid my wastes in the final untouched boxes. I stood, oil dripping from me, and took the last tissues from the last enormous tissue box. I wiped clean my traces, stepping back, towards the safety of my jar, and stuffed the tissues down the back of the jar. That gap was almost solid now with oily tissues. The pipes which heated my jar also heated these oily rags. I thought I smelt a trace of combustion, a hint of charred paper under the stronger scent of hot oil.

I climbed into the corner to check and, pushing head first down through the warm, soft, oily pile of paper, I uncovered the ventilation grill into the next room. My ear beside it, I heard a woman's "Oh!" and a familiar, regular, slapping sound.

"Oh!" said a woman.

"Oh!" said a man.

Both in the urgent accents of love.

The slow, rhythmic slap of lubricated scrotum on buttocks continued. Oh, I said, not aloud, but in my head, audible only to me, alone. Not audible at all. A mere imaginary sound. No instrument but my consciousness to record it. I had not, I think, felt alone in that storeroom till that moment.

"I love you," said the thin voice of the man to me through the ventilator grille.

"Oh Papa," I said, upside down, to the air.

"I love you, honey," gasped the woman.

"Oh Mama," I replied, warm in the hug of oil and tissue. Almost loud enough to hear myself.

"I love you so much," said the man.

"I love you too, Papa," I whispered.

"I love you so much my darling," said the woman.

"I love you too, Mama."

They finished at last, and slapped to a halt, and spoke no more.

The conversation had filled me with an emotion. I could not be entirely sure if it were sorrow or joy. I returned carefully, brimful of it, to my jar, to lie low in the last of my oil. There I slept like a baby, waking every hour to suck and chuckle and cry.

THERE WAS the sensation of light on my closed eyelids. But this time it did not swiftly cease, and groggy from my sleep and tears and laughter, I lifted my heavy head till it cleared the oil's low surface, and I tilted my head left and right till the oil cleared my ears, and I listened as the sailors found all spoilt, further and further back, toward me. And they swore and they laughed and they cried. "We shall take in new stores when we land," said the cook. "We will be there by dawn. And all this can go then." And I was content. Fate or chaos was leading me ashore; and so my destiny would play itself out, if I had a destiny. Or my life, if I had merely a life. And I sank back into the oil to

sleep, and to conserve my strength for the challenges of dawn.

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AT DAWN they threw me overboard, in my jar. The jar hit the water, and I hit the jar.

I woke to a sensation of panic, rising and falling, breathing and choking. The jar, containing so much air, and I, bobbed upon the Pacific waves, rising to a crest and plunging to a trough.

The battered tip of my breathing tube, outside the jar, was sometimes in water and sometimes in air, and so I breathed and choked and rose and fell. And the day was very long.

At first, I tried to keep track of up and down. I could tell which way was up by the dark blue of the ocean, the light blue of the sky. The miles of water under me, the miles of sky above.

But then there came a point, in the dusk, where the light sky grew dark and the million stars of the milky way appeared. And the dark sea grew bright with a million phosphorescent lights. And the darkening blue of the sky met the lightening blue of the sea, and they were the same blue, above and below and around me.

I looked neither up nor down at the little lights, the near and far, the cold glow of the jellyfish and the fusion-driven stars, in their galaxies and clusters, rotating in the void all about me: everything was one and all was infinite.

And even though the oil was gone, the world was very beautiful. I was sorry when I rolled ashore, in my empty jar, up the crunching sand. ■