

THE GAY GHOST OF NORTH WOOLWICH PIER

by

Jugular Malloy

Jugular Malloy
hello@jugularmalloy.uk
<https://jugularmalloy.uk/>

NOTES: ¿ = question intonation, without it being a question

ACT I

KATARINA: I was cycling back from a Deliveroo shift, I work in Shoreditch because there's more jobs there so it's a 10km cycle and I get back late at night. I remember, that it was a wet night, and when it's wet the discharge from the sugar pile at Tate&Lyle mingles with the rain water on the road and it creates this weird watery black road treacle that splashes on you and it sticks to your clothes and it gets in your mouth and you can taste that it's sweet.

I had some leftovers from the last job I did, sometimes, at the end of the night when the restaurants are throwing out the leftovers they give it out to the riders. They're not meant to but it's one of the perks of the job. This time it was Nandos, so I was looking forward to it, so, well I know it's not the safest but my boyfriend at the time was quite controlling, but on a Saturday night, he knew I finished late at different times. So basically Saturday nights were when I could go to my spot by the old pier and take a bit of time for myself without him getting funny with me when I got in.

So I get my food and go towards the stairs that take you over the flood barrier and to my spot- the stairs by the old pier that go down to the foreshore when the tide's out.

But the stairs, were blocked off by these big grey hoardings, basically they'd just started building those rich people flats they're building there now. I was so pissed off I can't even tell you. I wanted to see how close I could get to my spot, so, I cycled down towards the ferry entrance and then went back on myself over the sloped bit¿ that takes you over the flood barrier.

I could already see from there that they'd blocked off the path from in front of the pier, but I wanted to see more, I was angry, I didn't feel ready to give up my spot yet. And as I reached it, and I could see my steps, and I finally started to take on board that I wasn't gonna get to eat my food on my steps, just as the words were forming inside my head, I heard a voice, not my voice, but a man's voice, it was like deep, but soft, and melodic. He went like
"This is my fucking spot, you bastards."

And right then, swear to God, no word of a lie, a guy, a black guy, a small black guy who was totally naked except for some very tiny, very tight, silver shorts, just like... emerged, from the hoardings. And I don't mean like, he opened a door, there's no door, it's totally blocked, he just... emerged.

He walked right past me like I wasn't there at all, he walked about as far as halfway between the pier and the end of the path, and then he just... disappeared.

I was scared shitless to be honest but I also kind of felt like we had something together in that moment. Anyway, I had to just eat my food on the kerb.

ACT II

SEAN: So, back in the eighties I used to go to the football, and I used to always go down with my mates Spud and Stewart. It was a Saturday, and we was celebrating. It'd been West Ham Millwall and we'd won 2 nil. Not only that, well, probably more important to us if I'm honest, our boys had the Millwall firm running after the match, and Millwall, they weren't, y'know, they weren't nothin to be sniffed at back then, they were serious boys. So it's safe to say that we was on a high. The adrenaline was pumping, we were feelin powerful. We went down to our usual spot down by the pier, and the tide was in so we sat at the top of the steps, those steps that go down to the beach when the tide's out. We had cans, fags, a little bit of coke, everything we needed. And we just sat on the top of the steps there y'know looking out over the river and talkin... can't remember what about, y'know, what you'd expect. Anyone walkin past probably woulda thought we were pretty loud and obnoxious but it's quiet down there at night and, anyway, as far as we were concerned that was our spot.

I was sat closest to the pier and I remember, I saw a glint of silver out of the corner of my eye over to my right, so I looked, and I saw that this black man near the pier, and I saw that he was completely naked, and he was wearing nothing but a pair of very tiny, very tight, silver shorts. He was small and, he was walking in a way that... it was obvious he was gay.

I instantly felt this huge wave of anger. And it was like this very powerful feeling kind of anger and Spud and Stewart must have seen me looking and so *they* looked over and they immediately got up. I remember there was this, there was just this few seconds of silence where all three of us were just watching this black bloke, because it was strange. But then I turned around to look at Spud and Stewart and I could see from their faces that they were feeling exactly the same thing that I was feeling.

PAUSE

I think we were just... for us that was our spot and I, I think we felt angry that... he felt that he could just walk up there, out in the open like that, without any shame. That that made us angry. That made us angry.

I shouted summin... summin I can't repeat, but he didn't even blink. By this time he was walking down the pier so I followed him. I shouted at him again but again he

didn't react, didn't turn around, nothing. That made me more angry. By this point he'd reached the end of the pier, I started running fast, I felt- I felt powerful. And when I got close, I put my hands out and lunged towards him to push him over the edge... but- as soon as, just as I expected the tips of my fingers to touch his shoulderblades, and I could see his back *clearly*... he disappeared. And I ended up following through and falling right off the end of the pier and into the river.

Now... I've lived in North Woolwich all my life and I've always been surrounded by water but I can't swim. I can't swim at all. I'm-I'm scared of water. And the tide was in, the water was high, and straight away I went under, and I could feel the undercurrent pulling me further. I was scared. I thought that was me, done. And I just remember thinking that I hope my Mum don't find out why I died. I don't know how long it was but I couldn't have been far off passing out when I heard this voice. And I don't wanna be funny but he did sound gay and he did sound black, he went

"This is my fucking spot you bastards."

Well, I thought that was it. But, the next thing I knew I was suddenly being pulled up out of the water by this, force, I mean it was fast, it was only a couple of seconds and my head broke the surface of the water and I was taking the biggest gulps of air I had ever taken in my life. I saw that Spud and Stewart were up there by the steps, and that I'd come up not that far from them. And I mean I musta looked worse but they looked white as fuckin sheets but they already had the life saving ring ready so they threw it down and I grabbed it and they managed to pull me over to the steps. As soon as I got up there I asked them what it was that pulled me up out of there but they just looked confused. They thought I'd swam my way up.

After that I was pretty shaken and I didn't leave my room at my Mum's for weeks. Spud and Stewart were really good, they came to visit me and bring me fags and magazines and stuff but, after a while... and I don't know why but, I just couldn't look at them anymore. So, I asked me Mum to stop letting them in.

ACT III

IAIN: The first night I met Jide was on the pier. He'd come in on the boat that day, he was a seaman from Nigeria, had his fun in the pubs and after kicking out he went down to the pier like a lot of the sailors liked to do and like us boys liked to do too. I could tell it wasn't his first time down here, he knew where to go and what to do. I remember he just looked at you with these beautiful warm eyes like he'd already known you for years. He was beautiful. He was petite, elegant, quite feminine actually, in his own way, you knew he was queer as soon as he started walking. Well of course we were at the pier so we did what you do at the pier and then we went our separate ways. And the next day, we both came back.

That summer there'd been a big strike, there were a lot of strikes in those days and I can't remember which one it was, but of course everything was delayed so Jide didn't have to go back on his boat so soon. So we ended up on that pier every night and after a week we felt like we'd go to know each other, and we liked each other, we liked each other a lot. A lot of the other boys on the pier in those days had women at home who they were happy with but I was never that sort and nor was Jide and I think we, I think we worked that out about each other.

He put up with me. I was very ignorant back then, very ignorant, I was awful, I couldn't pronounce his name right for three weeks straight but he put up with me. And he didn't put up with much, he used to get treated awfully round here and people would say the most *dreadful* things to him and he would always send them off packing one way or another. He had a *razor sharp* tongue, and not many started something with him and came out of it well. But he put up with me, and I felt ever so grateful for that.

Well, one week turned into two weeks and that turned into three and after a month we were in love. I knew his ship was due to leave soon and I couldn't stand to see him go. I knew North Woolwich wasn't the best place in the world and I knew he loved the ocean and that he loved Lagos, so, when he told me he wanted to stay of course I was over the moon but I did make sure I asked him if he was sure. He said he was sure, he said he loved me and that... that that was all that mattered..

Well, his boat left without him and I got him a job where I worked at the Tate&Lyle sugar refinery. Jide was

a very educated man and he knew all about the history of sugar- which I knew nothing about, he had to teach me- so the irony of working in that place was not lost on him. And I think it was a very painful and bitter irony for him. He was an incredibly sensitive and kind hearted soul and I know it broke his heart every day to handle that sugar knowing where it came from. I used to say to him, y'know, "but slavery's over, Jide" and he'd look at me with that look of sort of pitying patience he often had and say "Do you think it's much better for the people now?".

We moved in together, into one of the little terraces on Saville Road, and we told people we were brothers. Of course people knew that wasn't true but I think we found it quite funny so we just kept insisting on it. Jide was a very talented musician and he used to play around the pubs at the weekend and he was just fantastic, everybody loved him. And we still went to the pier, sometimes we went together and sometimes we went on our own. Jide loved the pier. He once said to me that when we had sex on the pier, right there on top on the river, he liked to think about how there was an uninterrupted passage of water between us and Lagos. It made him happy thinking about that.

In the 30s conditions at Tate&Lyle weren't good, and he wanted to improve things. And I don't think the management took very kindly to a small little black man telling them how to do things. Fortunately for *them* the union didn't take too kindly to it either, so he was never allowed in the meetings. The thing is, if the union had ever stopped being so stupid and realised what an asset Jide could have been to them I think they could have kicked up a fair bit of a stink... and I think maybe the management were clever enough to know that. All I know is that, well, I worked there too and I saw first hand how careful he was. He was a very dextrous and capable man, he wasn't clumsy...

We were working in different parts of the refinery so... I didn't find out that day. And of course we weren't married so they had no obligation to tell me anything, and they didn't. It was quite normal for him to go off and do his own thing at night so I wasn't too worried when he didn't come home... but when I woke up alone...

I went into work and found out from the shop steward. He told me that Jide had fallen into a vat of boiling sugar. It was an accident, apparently.

I was devastated. I walked out of work right then and there and I just went straight home and cried into our

pillows.

That night, I went to the pier. It was a Tuesday, so there weren't that many boys around, and I walked to the end and I just stood out over the river. At our spot. And, I felt the presence of someone walking towards me, so I turned around so I could let whoever it was know I wasn't interested that night... and... it was Jide. There he was, smiling, beautiful and radiant. And I knew that he was in heaven, and that he had joined the angels, because he was wearing nothing but a pair of very tiny, very tight, silver shorts.

Jugular Malloy, 2021



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