

A photograph of a roller coaster car full of passengers, oriented upside down. The car is green and purple, and the passengers are wearing safety harnesses. The background is a clear blue sky with some light clouds. The text "Richard Buxton" is overlaid on the left side of the image in a green font, and "Roller Coaster" is overlaid on the bottom right in a yellow font.

**Richard
Buxton**

**Roller
Coaster**



Richard Buxton lives with his family in Sussex and is a recent graduate of the Creative Writing Masters programme at Chichester University. He has a long lasting interest in America and has produced a novel as well as a growing collection of short stories related to the US Civil War.

Roller Coaster

A simple family holiday in Florida has some unexpected ups and downs. Not all fears need to be conquered.

"Excellent. Characters are strong, setting is convincing and the language leaves a powerful impression."

Bedford Writing Competition

Roller Coaster

I wake in fear. Carrie is shaking me and there is a knock on the door. A muffled voice is saying something about towels.

Carrie whispers, 'There's someone outside.'

The yellow light from around the bathroom door – that we'd left on for Lily – helps me to remember where we are; in America, in Orlando, on the 5th floor of a cheap hotel. The sharp knock again – *tap, tap, tap* – insistent, almost rude. 'I have your towels.'

I sit up, naked. I whisper too. 'We have towels.'

'Of course we have. It's gone midnight. He's got the wrong room. Tell him to go away.'

Why *are* we whispering? It's like we're hiding. In the dark I sweep the floor with my foot to find my dressing-gown. Instead I catch my toe on the solid leg of the armchair. 'Crap . . . Call reception.'

'What?'

I struggle to organise my dressing-gown in the dark. 'Call reception. Ask them if they sent someone.'

'Just tell him he has the wrong room.'

It takes me two attempts to guess the right armhole and then the belt's on the inside. 'Why would anyone order towels in the middle of the night? Just ask them.'

Tap, tap, tap.

'Ring them!'

I edge to the peephole. Outside on the balcony walkway is a black man in a yellow T-Shirt. I can't see any towels. He seems too far away to be able to reach the door, but as I watch, his arm lifts and telescopes towards me. *Tap, tap, tap.*

'We haven't ordered any towels,' I call through the door. I sound scared. 'Please go away.' Why the hell did I say please?

'Is that reception?' Carrie puts on her best BBC voice. 'We have someone here who says he's delivering towels.'

I look again. He's still there, framed against the neon of Orlando.

'Thank you.' Carrie puts the phone down.

'What did they say?'

'They asked if we'd ordered any towels.'

'And?'

'I told them we hadn't. Is he still out there?'

'Has anyone ordered any towels?'

'They didn't say.'

'But that was the point!'

Carrie jumps out of bed. 'Oh for goodness sake, I'll open it. He's just got the wrong room.'

'No! I've told him to go.'

She pushes me aside and looks through the peephole. 'He's gone,' she says, then climbs back into bed and beats her pillow. 'Are you coming, my hero?' She doesn't wait for an answer and I'm left in the dark, my dressing-gown gaping. Lily, across the room, has slept through the whole thing.

Is that it? Two minutes of panic and I'm expected to just doze off again. I drop my gown and get back into bed. I want to back into Carrie, but a frosty line has been drawn down the middle of the mattress.

I'm wide awake. The curtain edges filter the beams from the night traffic on Route 4. Vertical orange stripes slide across the walls, marking uneven time. I wonder at the change the towel man has wrought over America. My theme park, family friendly, big breakfast America is gone. In its place, just a closed door away, is homeless America, gun-toting America, drugged up America. Anybody could come up the open stairwell and along our landing, anyone at all. Would I have felt the same if it was a white man, or a woman? What did that say about me?

Yesterday morning we'd had to call reception because Lily had closed the safe and then forgotten what code she'd used to lock it. We couldn't open it. The guy they'd sent had a small spanner, the size you use to tighten bicycle nuts. He clipped off a panel and just opened the safe. All that trust we'd misplaced in the numbers and the reassuringly noisy locking mechanism. Gone. What was the difference with the door? It was no more than a paper palisade. Any number of cleaners would have a master swipe card they could pass to their boyfriends. The latch was on, but maybe they had a wrench or a screwdriver for that. And what would it have mattered anyway if Carrie had just opened up?

I get up and furtively push the armchair up against the door.

'What are you doing now?'

'I thought you were asleep.'

'It was just a mistake.'

I dump my suitcase on the chair. Carrie sweeps back the sheet and goes to the bathroom, noisier than she needs to be. I think about reading but I'd need the light. She comes back and sits heavily on the bed, lies down and tugs the sheet over herself. Putting the light on seems like a bad move.

I lose track of time. If ever I approach sleep, the world conspires to frighten me fully conscious: a souped up bike blasts down the freeway, a police siren wails out in the hot night, footsteps – only one set – tread along the landing above. This is crazy. I can't remember ever feeling this scared. It's almost primeval, guttural. Where has it come from? In the other double bed, I can tell Lily is dreaming: her breathing quickens and then relaxes. I'd like to think my fear is all for her, that I'm just concerned for my wife and child. The truth is I can't feel past my own fear, *for me*, who is closest to the door.

I try to focus on something else, something that might let me drift off. I think about the theme park. It had been alright, not as stupidly busy as we might have expected. Though that had brought its own problem. The big rides, the ones designed to scare the bejesus out of you, only had twenty or thirty minute queues. We couldn't say to Lily, 'It's just too long a wait, Sweetie,' and find something tamer. Instead there was a constant, semi-disguised three-way negotiation.

'Last week, when we watched it on YouTube, you said you'd do it.'

'I guess I'll have to go on it if your father can't manage it.'

'It's more your mother's thing. She's better with heights.'

'I think we should eat early and then go on it at lunch time, when there's no queue.' And then, 'I couldn't possibly go on it now, I've just eaten.'

Lily's dream was to go on the 'Rip Ride Rockit'. 'Rockit' because you can choose your personal soundtrack to accompany you being hoisted a hundred and fifty feet straight up, before being thrown upside down and inside out over a half-mile of glossy, red Meccano. It was never going to happen. How did she get to be so brave anyway? What is it with ten year old girls these days? When I was ten, girls did nothing more dangerous

than roller-skate. The perils of being an older parent: at fifty I'm expected to do something that I would have sensibly avoided at twenty-one.

Somewhere in the middle of the hot afternoon, Lily realised she was on a losing wicket and dropped down to my level of bravery, which tolerated queasy 3-D shows and water rides. Water rides are alright. It was an okay day. But it's a long way to fly and a lot of money for just okay. Carrie had deflected Lily's disappointment at me. 'Maybe your father will be braver tomorrow.' It was wrong to give her false hope. If Carrie had wanted a superhero she should have married someone else.

The air-conditioning clicks; I jump as if jabbed by a cattle prod. The unit hums into life. My fear is still awake too. It occurs to me that I stored up all that fear during the day: fear that somehow I'd have to ride the roller coaster, fear that I'm a disappointing husband, fear of how my little girl might see me. It's been slumbering just below the surface and all poured out when the towel man got the wrong room. I feel the truth of it. With the realisation my balloon of angst deflates. It morphs into something else, something sadder, something true. I tuck the feelings in and fall asleep.

Early next morning we're back at the theme park. By the afternoon, it's hotter than the day before. I'm drying from the Jurassic Park ride which has a splash finish and my adrenalin is yet to burn off. There's a Blues Brothers show in a fake town square. We're sitting on some steps in the shade. It's a good show. Lily doesn't seem that interested; I guess you need to have seen the film. She's shovelling popcorn, pressing it into her mouth. There's been no begging to go on the big rides today. Carrie is already angling to leave, saying we shouldn't plan to stay late if we want to come in early tomorrow.

Beyond the show the red roller coaster mocks me and my eyes are drawn above the dancing. It's metronomic. As one batch of screamers swoop out of the first drop the batch ahead career and twist in the opposite direction. Is it really so high? The victims are tipped onto their backs for the haul up; *clack, clack, clack*. It's entirely vertical. I count thirteen seconds of suffering before they are ratcheted over and dumped downwards. I imagine the point at which I'd be alright, past peak fear. I guess it would be after the first three-sixty loop. All the riders survive. There are no medics racing to the ride exit, no body bags rolled into an ambulance. Instead, friends and families emerge from the production line, laughing and smiling, closer than before they got on. The ride has transformed them somehow.

I think of other things men have been asked to do, other fears faced: fighting for your girl, charging over mined beaches, last into the lifeboats. The Blues Brothers are in full swing. 'Everybody . . . needs somebody . . . Everybody . . . needs somebody . . . Someone to love.'

Another batch of people, braver than me, climb to the start. I corral the last of my adrenalin. It's only fear. More people get killed crossing the road. Lily finishes her popcorn and hands me the box. 'What are we doing next?'

'Would you like to go on the Rockit?'

Carrie is waiting for us, holding our hats and the backpack. She's smiling.

'Did you see us?' asks Lily, running to her.

My legs feel like they belong to a two hour old foal; my knees have lost their ability to lock, but I'm smiling too.

'I did,' says Carrie. 'Was it fun?'

I taunt Lily, 'You screamed the whole time.'

'You're supposed to scream,' she says, and hugs me. 'At least I didn't say *Oh My God*, *Oh My God*, twenty times on the way up.'

I laugh and kiss her head.

‘What now?’ asks Carrie.

‘Again!’ says Lily.

‘Alright,’ I say.

The afternoon blurs by, it really does, spent tumbling and rolling in the Florida sky. After the second go on the Rockit, Lily pulls me to the Dragon Challenge, another of yesterday’s failures. I have the hang of this now; you live somewhere inside the fear, don’t try to control it. We run straight from the exit back into the queue, waving for Carrie to come too. And she does. Lily climbs into a seat ahead of us and I’m between them both. Feet dangling, we’re clicked up to the start. I’ve never heard Carrie scream before.

We stop for a cool, giant ice-cream then hit the rides on into the dusk. Rather than head back to the cheap hotel snack bar, we dive into Bubba Gump’s and order more food than we can possibly eat. But I don’t care. Carrie sips her wine and takes my hand. She has a look about her that I haven’t seen in a long time. We share a long kiss. Lily covers her eyes and says, ‘Eeewww.’

The last bus has gone by the time we are ready to leave so we get a cab. Carrie leans her tired weight into me all the way to the hotel. As I turn from paying the driver I can see there are a lot of people crowded around the reception desk inside. It’s late for a check-in rush, but then I guess planes arrive at all hours. I’m glad we can go straight to our room. I’m ready for sleep. Lily hits the fifth floor button in the lift. When the doors open she finds a last nugget of energy and skips out and round the corner onto the open balcony. When we follow we almost bump into her. She’s just standing there. Carrie’s hand tightens on mine. Our room is the second one, but further along there are three cops. Before them a yellow tape is stretched across the balcony. A camera flashes out onto the landing at measured intervals from an open door. I let go of Carrie’s hand and fumble in my wallet for the card key. A cop has spotted us. He ducks under the tape and walks our way. Lily moves behind me. I just want to get into our room and go to swipe the card.

‘Sir. I need a word with you, sir.’

‘Sure. What’s going on?’

I look down at his holster, open and worn forward of his hip.

‘When were you here last?’

‘We went to the park early.’

‘You see or hear anything strange last night?’

I look at Carrie. ‘Someone knocked on our door. After midnight. He said he had towels for us.’

‘You open up?’

‘No. We hadn’t asked for any towels.’

He looks past me at Lily.

‘I saw him . . . through the peephole.’

‘Good. That’s good. I’ll need to get a description.’

Behind him, beyond the tape, a waist high stretcher is carelessly worked out of the door, knocking into the balcony wall. There is a sudden coolness in the breeze and my gut feels heavy.

‘You might wanna get your little girl inside, sir.’

Carrie snatches the card from my hand and takes Lily in. The tape is torn away and the stretcher pushed towards me, a rhythmical clack at each turn of the wheel.

‘Middle aged guy.’ The cop gets out his notebook. ‘On business maybe. Cleaner found him late afternoon.’

Strapped tightly to the stretcher is a black bag, so tight that you could see the man must have been very overweight.

Clack, clack, clack.

‘He was knifed . . . From the wound, I’m thinking it’s unlikely you’d have heard much.’

Clack, clack, clack.

‘Rare in this district, but it’s easy for anyone to get up off the streets.’

A few more seconds, that’s all, and it’ll be over.

The cop and I squeeze up against the wall to let the stretcher by. But even so the shiny black plastic brushes me as it passes, just a toothy silver zip where the face belongs. I feel the world turn and my stomach lose its weight. There is a sensation of falling and the cop grabs my arm.

‘Let’s go into your room, sir.’

My knees won’t lock as he takes me inside. I imagine people screaming around me. I’m in free-fall.

Ten minutes later, the cop stands up to leave. ‘There’ll be someone guarding the scene tonight. No need to check-out like all those others. You did the right thing, sir, not opening that door.’

‘I was afraid.’

‘Sometimes a little fear is a good thing. Try to enjoy your holiday, sir.’

He leaves. Carrie and Lily sit huddled together on the bed.

‘Help me move the chair up against the door.’

Carrie comes right over.