

Diz Lives

By Andrew Ervin

Dizzy died today. Or yesterday maybe, I don't know. I read the newspaper headline: Dizzy Gillespie dead at 75. That doesn't mean anything. Maybe it was yesterday.

We don't get as much news here as you do in America. Or, we get a different kind of news, I should say. I started to read the obituary over someone's shoulder on the tube this afternoon and made it to the cause of death before the guy who actually paid for the paper turned around and gave me one of those looks. People in London get upset when you read over their shoulder on the tube.

The newspapers only write about royal ribbon-cuttings, soccer scores and the previous day's I.R.A. attack — all old news. Every day another bomb goes off and every morning they publish another brief article on page seven or eight, well buried under the topless woman found on page three of every reputable newspaper. Terrorism isn't front-page news anymore, not like it is in America. Violence has become a part of life here; it boils just under the surface of the daily routine, ready to burst at any moment. They blew up a laundromat right down the block yesterday morning but I slept through it. A kiosk in Charing Cross Station sells USA Today. It's not much of a newspaper by local standards, not having pictures of naked ladies, but it does have news from home.

The Muted Horn is the only pub nearby with a TV, but they never have the news on. They only get two stations, and one of them just shows darts around the clock. I can't imagine why so many people crowd around to watch darts. They're there every time I go to the pub. There's a little camera mounted into the wall above the board so you see the dart flying towards you before it disappears out of view below the TV screen. You'd think they'd have the news on once in awhile. But nobody cares about news. Another building gets blown up and everybody's watching darts. I'm starting to enjoy it now because it's the only thing ever on.

There'll probably be something on CNN about Dizzy dying. Maybe his cheeks finally gave out and popped in mid-song. Wouldn't surprise me; things are exploding left and right. Poor Dizzy. Seventy-five years old. I'll bet that tuft under his bottom lip was powder white by the time he croaked. I read once that people spray-painted "Bird Lives" all over the place when Charlie Parker died, on buildings and sidewalks and people's cars. You don't see that kind of vandalism anymore, not here at least. Why spray-paint something when you can blow it up just as easily?

I've only been in London a few months now but I've learned my way around well enough. The winter's not as cold as I expected but it does rain every day like they said it would. I need to take a few more philosophy classes if I want to get into grad school but I had a few problems with the faculty at the University of Bath. I don't want to get into it right now, but let's

just say there are some people who shouldn't be teaching ethics classes. They revoked my scholarship and booted me out of the campus housing in an obvious but vain attempt at full-scale deportation. That was when I moved to London, and to Chinatown.

I had enough money to lease this place. It's tiny, and I don't have much in the way of furniture yet, but it smells really good because of the combination grocery store/bakery right downstairs. The people who own it also own my flat. They gave me a job delivering food from the restaurant they also own down the block. I kept getting lost at first, though, being new in town. Everyone called back and complained about cold food but what do they expect when they order out in the middle of the fucking winter? That's not to say that winter here is as bad as it is back home. It's more wet than cold, sure, but it is cold enough to chill an order of hot and sour soup or kung pao chicken. To my credit, the fortune cookies never got cold. Still, the restaurant got so many complaints that they had to fire me. They gave me another job because they knew I wouldn't be able to afford their flat otherwise, but it's only part-time. They take the rent directly out of my salary. The pay could be better but between that and the money my old man sends every month, I scrape enough together to cover the cost of the flat, some food, and a daily trip to the Muted Horn.

The Chinese people here are different from the ones back home too. When you go into a Chinese restaurant there, you expect the waiter to have a heavy accent, like "You want flied lice?" Here, they all have perfect British accents, which threw me off at first. I went into this restaurant where the waiters all looked like Cato from those Pink Panther movies but when the guy took my order he sounded as if he were moonlighting from his job in the House of Lords. I couldn't help laughing. That same restaurant now gives out my fortunes. That's what I do — I write the fortunes you find when you get a fortune cookie in any of the decent Chinese restaurants in London. I type them up and give them to the people downstairs. That's it. Like last night, I went to the Szechwan House over on Lisle Street. I don't like that place so much, even though they get their cookies fresh from the folks downstairs. I don't trust any Chinese restaurant that doesn't get their cookies fresh. There's nothing worse than those prepackaged ones that break apart when you bite into them. The fortunes they put in them are generic, like Bazooka bubble gum wrappers. **YOU WILL BE SUCCESSFUL IN LOVE** or **YOUR LIFE WILL BE HAPPY AND PEACEFUL**. What bullshit. Anyway, there were these two kids, maybe seventeen, eighteen years old, sitting in front, right in the window. They were eating real fast, like there was no tomorrow and they hadn't fulfilled St. Peter's appetizer quota. I'm talking soup, shrimp toast, egg rolls, fried dumplings, the whole goddamned menu. They weren't talking to each other or anything, just sucking the stuff down.

After going through the whole list of appetizers, the kids scarf down a couple big platters of moo shu chicken and Hunan shrimp. So I'm beginning to get worried, like, are they going to have enough room for my cookies? They did, of course, but I was nearly through my second bottle of rice wine by the time they were ready for dessert. Cato brought the cookies out with the check, and you could tell how psyched he was for a big tip.

Then the kids pulled the cookies open — this is the part I love — and read their fortunes aloud. I had some trouble hearing them because there was a lot of traffic through the front door of this place but the girl said "You go first" because the girls always say that. The guy looked at

his fortune; I was really excited. Then he finally read it: EACH OF THE MANY ROADS LEAD TO THE ONE. That's great, if I may say so myself. I waited to see his reaction, but he didn't react at all. Nothing. Not a word. He just ate the cookie. I couldn't believe it. The bastard just ate it.

Then she opened hers and read it. IN THE MIDST OF WINTER I REALIZED THERE WAS IN ME AN INVINCIBLE SUMMER. Camus. Another great one. I love that one.

She read it again, and I could tell neither of them understood it. The fucking idiots didn't understand it, so I got a little annoyed. They both sort of shrugged and began fumbling around for their coats and stuff. I threw the last of my pound notes on the table for my bill and jumped up to catch them before they left.

I stepped in front of them, blocking their exit. "That's Albert Camus!" I said.

So the kid goes, "Excuse me?"

"That fortune, that's Albert Camus!" I told them, probably more excited than I should've been. Wine makes me a little jumpy sometimes.

"Yeah, so?" he asked, getting angry. He was probably mad that I'd been eavesdropping, but what the hell. I mean, they're my fortunes, right?

So I was really pissed off by then — not to mention far more intoxicated than I'd thought. "You heartless philistine," I blurted. "That's the problem with you fucking people. You have no fucking idea what it's like to create, to, to—" I started stammering, thinking what to say next "— to make something from nothing!" Not my wittiest retort of all time, and I'm pretty sure I stole it from a movie, but I was pleased enough at the time.

The guy sort of smirked, which pissed me off even more, but the girl was more scared than amused by that point. He took her by the arm and led her outside, pushing me out of the way in the process. I could feel the whole restaurant watching me make an ass of myself, but it didn't matter. I followed them out to the street, where it had already grown dark. As dark as Chinatown gets at night, anyway. I just exploded, and started yelling at them again: "Read some fucking Camus, buddy! The fucking Plague, The fucking Stranger, The Myth of fucking Sisyphus!" People passing by stopped to gawk and laugh at me, but the kids from the restaurant scurried away without saying anything else.

I kept yelling until they were out of view. I was still furious and, having spent my last few pounds on dinner, I came back here to my flat. I had most of a bottle of really awful Chianti left that I'd been trying not to drink but I fired it open.

I sat down to collect my thoughts, and the energy left my body at once like it was draining from my feet, through the floorboards, and into the bakery downstairs. There was no way I'd make it to the Horn, and even if I did I couldn't afford to drink anything. And I wasn't in the mood to watch darts anyway, so I decided to write some fortunes. They don't edit them or

anything downstairs. They just put the slips of paper with my fortunes on them onto the circles of dough and fold them up into cookies.

I wrote all kinds of stuff, like YOU ARE A HEARTLESS PHILISTINE and THERE IS NO FATE THAT CANNOT BE SURMOUNTED BY SCORN and HELL IS OTHER PEOPLE. It got really ugly. Anyway, I carried them downstairs and gave them to a guy in the bakery. I'm not certain, but I think it was the guy who had my old bike job. I don't know why he was there instead of at the restaurant. Then I came back upstairs and passed out.

There were scraps of paper everywhere from cutting fortunes apart when I got up this morning, but I didn't remember what I'd written until only a little while ago. My head still hurt and my mouth tasted like someone had stuffed it with roadkill while I slept. I had nothing to do, so I sat around for a while staring at the books and bug-infested Chinese food cartons piled up on the floor. I didn't move all morning, except to drink some water and piss it out again. Around two o'clock, I took the tube over to the post office to check my mail. That was when I read about Dizzy's death. My headache was gone by then and my appetite was back in full force. A money order had arrived from my father, which I immediately exchanged for sterling.

I stopped by the Muted Horn for a pint but their TV was broken so I left and went to the Mandarin Empire for lunch. I wasn't in a hurry to go over there, though, because it's on Lisle, right down the block from the Szechwan House. It had been — what — not even twenty-four hours since I made a jerk of myself yelling at those kids? So I felt funny even being in the neighborhood. You know. But the Mandarin Empire is the place my boss owns, so I can eat there for free once in awhile, and I wanted my money to last longer than a week this time.

Thursday's usually a busy day for some reason, but it was still early, only like three or four. There weren't many people there, but a group of fat, Chinese businessmen caught my attention. Those guys really love reading their fortunes, more than anyone else, so I sat near them. There were also four older, snooty-looking English gentlemen at the next table.

I always try to sit in the middle of the room so I can be near all the action, but the Mandarin Empire is different — they only have two or three tables in the middle, and they're big so they reserve them for large groups. I've never sat there. I always get seated in one of the booths around the perimeter, which is a drag because I can only hear the fortunes of the people next to me. But I got a seat against the wall, across from the Chinese people, right behind the group of tweedy old men.

The businessmen looked as if they'd been there for hours — they had duck sauce and soy sauce spilled everywhere. Plates and bowls and various instruments of oriental dining cluttered the table as they continued to eat and eat. I assumed my boss had fired another busboy. When they finished, I watched as they pulled open their cookies and read the fortunes. You can tell it's like some kind of ritual to the Chinese. They really get into it. It felt great to watch all this, especially after last night. So they took turns reading them out loud, and everyone around the table either nodded in approval, lifting their fat Chinese shoulders, or knitting their cropped foreheads in genuine concern for their friends' well being.

Not all of my fortunes are good, of course. Come on, a lot of bad stuff happens, especially in London, and not everyone can have a cheery fortune. These guys were taking it real serious; some of them were truly happy and others depressed, all on account of my fortunes. This one guy got **YOUR POOR MANNERS WILL CAUSE YOU CATASTROPHIC LOSS**. I felt bad watching this guy hang his head, but it wasn't my fault. All his friends teased him too, first when he read out his fortune, then again when he held the door open for everyone to leave. Their laughter lingered behind in the restaurant for a few minutes after they left. When it finally died off, I zoned in on the conversation at the table behind me.

The old, snooty guys hadn't gotten to their fortunes yet. They were too busy arguing about philosophy — Gadamer and Heidegger and shit like that. They were far more worked up about it than you'd expect. I didn't have a good look at them, but I'm getting really pumped just listening in. Now I've got my back against the cushion, so I can't see their table, but I can tell they're drinking a whole lot because they were raucous, and because the sound of ice rattling around in their glasses drowned out parts of the conversation. Next thing I know they're fighting over the check, which means they're about to open their cookies. I abruptly swallow and put my knife and fork down. You'd think I'd know how to use chopsticks by now, but no.

The guy directly behind me gets nominated to read his first and everyone grows real quiet. Even the ice stops moving, which is cool. I hear him open the cookie and pause for a sec before reading it aloud. He doesn't say anything at first, like he's reading it to himself, so everyone else at the table starts badgering him: "What's it say?" and "Out with it, man!"

So he says "I can't believe this," and I'm on the edge of my seat, practically on the floor in anticipation. It must be a good one. "This is absolutely awful," he says.

I'm dying with curiosity until someone takes it from his hand and reads **YOU WILL BE BLOWN UP BY THE I.R.A.**

I spit a mouthful of beer all over my food and spring from my seat hollering "I didn't write that!" Of course my jumping around and yelling only startles them even more. One of them spills a drink, and the scent of expensive whiskey rises instantly from their table.

But of course I wrote it. I must have. I mean, who else could have? It must have been last night, after the scene at the Szechwan House, but I certainly don't remember it. If I got a fortune like that, I'd be pissed off too. So I'm trying to apologize and they're staring at me, trying to figure out why the hell I'm bothering them, how I fit into the calamity already in progress. That's when a team of waiters appears out of nowhere to clean up the table, like the pit crew at the Indy 500. They all know me, too, and give me the dirtiest looks you could imagine. So I'm just standing there, my food getting cold, and one of the old guys keeps looking at me, the one who got the I.R.A. fortune. And he looks real familiar. I recognize him but I can't figure out if it's because I've been eavesdropping on him for half an hour or if I really know him from somewhere.

He's staring right at me and his face gets redder and redder until he finally yells "What the hell are you doing here?" And at that instant I figure it out — it's Dr. Ramsden from the philosophy department at the University of Bath. The guy who had me expelled.

I didn't know what to tell him. "I'm only eavesdropping on your conversation, don't mind me. Oh, and by the way, I'm glad I told everyone about how you harass coeds... And you're wrong about Nietzsche's concept of the eternal return being entirely teleological, you creep!"

But I didn't. I just stammered instead. "Well, sir, I'm... uh..."

His colleagues had paid by that time and were nearly out the door. I stood there and watched Ramsden storm off. A pile of whiskey-soaked cookies remained behind on his table. I left them there unread. Rather than confronting my boss and risking another public scene, I just left my dinner half-eaten and walked out.

The air outside felt great even though it had started to rain again. I was drenched by the time I got to the pub. The wet sidewalk reflected the blue neon trumpet above the front door. The word had spread about Gillespie's death, because someone had spray-painted "Diz lives" on the pavement out front. The paint had run a little bit because of the rain but it was still legible.

Diz lives. Who would have thought it? Come tomorrow morning, if I still have my job — and my flat — I think I'll put that in a cookie.