

WHAT I KNOW ABOUT TIME

(for D.L.)

by Peter Frankis

I was telling her this story. 'There's a scene in *Inland Empire* where Lorna Dern –'

'It's Laura,' she said.

'What did I say?'

'You said Lorna. It's Laura Dern, the actress, long horsey face, doe eyes.'

We were lying in bed watching the ceiling, counting the cracks / we were at the table arguing / head in my hands there's me replaying it all, obsessing.

And I said: 'Yeah OK, so Laura is talking to this weird Eastern European woman who's just turned up at her door and invited herself in — she's Russian or something.'

'You don't know?' she asked.

'You can't tell. So she—'

'—the witch?'

‘—the hag says, “What do I know about time. If it was nine forty-five, I’d probably think it was after midnight. And if it was tomorrow, you’d be sitting over there on the couch.” And then she points and Lorna can’t stop herself—’

‘There you go again,’ she said. ‘It’s Laura: L-A-U-R-A. Jeez what’s wrong with you?’

She gets up / she stands up / she got up then.

‘Where are you going I haven’t...finished.’

She’s banging about in the kitchen muttering about arthouse.

‘Drink. I need a drink.’

‘You could have coffee? I could put the machine...’

‘Don’t want coffee, don’t want tea, don’t want cocoa or camomile. I want a D-R-I-N-K — ‘

A bottle / a teacup and saucer / a box of something, cereal maybe, tumbled to the floor.

‘Let me —’

But she held up that stop-sign hand — the hand that says don’t touch, don’t help, don’t do any stupid thing or so help me I’m just going to explode all over you.

Fine. ‘Try the top shelf, there’s some brandy.’

More banging about / more containers accelerating at 9.8 metres per second per second. Per second per second.

Here's Kitty leaving.

He's at the window watching. Day's gone, it's evening already,
already dark—

—and the insufficient street lights are coming on, there's no colour in
the traffic and the crowded pavement, only occasional shop lights:
mostly monochrome, everyone is walking into shadow out of
brightness, hundreds of figures moving in and out of the murk.

—and there she is gone like an arrow down the front step, crosses the
road and joins the pedestrians. From the window he follows her as she
moves through the crowd but it gets harder with distance. Here's Kitty
emerging from under an awning. She's approaching a gang of boys in
bursting parkas and reversed caps heading in the opposite direction.
They're on a collision course. For a moment he loses her as they come
together and become a single mass going into shadow. Then, as you'd
expect, the boys re-emerge on one side of the awning and a moment
later there's Kitty back on her way down the street. Now she's lit by a
shop window—a hardware store, hung hammers and saws swaying
like a serial killer's studio, and again she's gone into shadow at the
mouth of an alley. No. Wait, that's her: Kitty's coming back up the hill
towards him, she's turned around and is walking back but, oh no, she's
run into a crowd of commuters up from the subway spilling out

hurrying home. It's hard to see. Now she's pushing a pram laden with grocery bags. Here she is again walking away, now transformed into a swaggering man a phone plugged into his ear, waving his arms as if he were the only one.

The darkness of the street buds off interchangeable plastic forms, little islands of light out of the undifferentiated blank blackness: a lit shoulder, a spangle of a necklace, a hand raised against the glare of a car's headlight.

He tried to follow all of Kitty's shape shifting and direction switching—growing taller, striding purposefully, now bent over with a cane tugging a Pekingese, now dawdling, now running helter skelter—until after a while he could not be sure whether Kitty or any remnant remained.

All he knew for certain was that she was gone.

He felt relief / light headed / a weight lifted.

—

'Where will you go?' I asked.

'The fuck you care,' she said.

'Can't you just...come back to bed? / ...sit down for a moment?'

(He should be stronger, less pathetic, less of a whiner / He's seen her like this before, the drinking doesn't help.)

'I've seen the future, it spoke to me.' And she held the green tumbler with two fingers of liquor, held it up to the yellow light and looked into the honey-coloured swirl.

'...the future,' she said again quietly.

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'...so the camera follows the hag's bony wrist – yellow and spotted and ghastly knobby rings and Laura despite herself, her instincts and how uncomfortable she is, can't help but follow.'

"Over there you'll be." The spell is cast.

'We see a trio of comfy chairs and a green sofa, empty—and then there's Laura tomorrow in jeans chatting and giggling with her girlfriends — telling a joke, something about who was seen climbing the fence at Mary Sweeney's party while everyone else was limo-ed away like normal people.

— and the phone rings

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'She's here' / 'You'd better come' / "What? Say it again, I got the part? Really?"

And Laura and girlfriends are all hugging and squealing and bouncing up and down on the antique lounges in the empty echoey room.

'I came as soon as I could but the plane...'

'I'll let the doctor know. You can wait down there.'

The corridor, the waiting room, the TV's hung in the corner: no matter the time, here it's always afternoon, always *Wheel of Fortune* or *Deal or No Deal*. A man, an old man, a skeleton a wreck really probably weighs less than fifty kilos, in a wheelchair, in his underpants, mouth moving, chewing on something, chewing on days gone by has somehow pulled the plaster from his foot and he's bleeding profusely onto his rubber sandals, down onto the footrest and dripping onto the floor.

His son, (he's older than me but not by much) looks up and our eyes meet but then they drift off: he doesn't really see me, it's just Dad and The Wheel coming around, ticka ticka ticka, \$900, ticka ticka, *Bankrupt*, ticka, \$600, ticka *Lose a Turn*. And the audience oo-s and ahs.

The son squats down over his father's foot trying to staunch the bleeding with a handful of borrowed Kleenex. The old man, eyes closed, is making 'oh' sounds: 'oh, oh, oh, oh' while pounding his birdy fists down onto his son's shoulders. The son hunches in against the rain of blows.

'It's Pete.' he said. 'She's here. Can you come?'

'The fuck.'

‘She’s tearing up the place. Shit man she’s your—’

‘Problem? Responsibility?’ I said. ‘Forget it. She’s the one who walked, slammed the door so hard the glass rattled.’

‘Just talk to her,’ he said. He puts his hand over the receiver. I could hear what was going on in the background: *“I got nothin to say to that fuck. Jesus”* — *“Just try won’t you? For Peetey?”* — *“For Peetey?”* — *“You can’t keep doing this.”* — *“Doin? DOIN? WHAT AM I DOIN?”* —

He’s back.

‘Alright, I’ll come.’

—

The place is way out in the suburbs so it takes hours standing about on unfamiliar platforms, sitting up the back in numbered buses but it also takes no time at all. Turn a corner and there’s always the unexpected, step through a doorway, go down any road and next thing you’re in a field, all the houses and pavements stopped. Ride that bus far enough and then you notice that all the hoardings and billboards are in Spanish or Cyrillic and the shops are shut up, the windows are smoking holes.

It’s already afternoon when he gets there. He’s brought some shopping: a fish, instant noodles, a carton of long-life milk.

It’s a fibro house, the worst in the street. The gate’s hanging off, no-one looks after the front, the path is littered, bags spilled and torn and

there's a green Ford up on bricks, grass verdant about it, wheels long gone and the brakes are rusted-on lumps.

The door is unlocked and the house is quiet, only the curtain moving in and out with the breeze.

He steps across the carpet, leaves the groceries on the kitchen table and turns. In the corner the TV is on silently playing some southern romance with Laura Dern in a big hat, the dappled sunlight sparkling on her perfect tears. He flicks it off.

'Kitty? Pete? Yo.'

Only the curtain breathing and low sunlight over the lino.

Go down the darkened corridor there's a glow from the bedroom.

A bedside lamp is draped with a red scarf, a thin blanket covers a form not moving, someone just breathing, asleep on the far side.

He stands and watches for a moment. And then he takes off his jacket, hangs his shirt and pants, lines his shoes up, rolls his socks inside. He lifts the blanket and lies down. He looks straight up counting the ceiling cracks, maybe he reaches over and clicks the light off careful not to disturb the sleeper. As the thin blanket of the afternoon settles he becomes still, listening to the bed creaking moving gently with their breathing, sensing time turning back on itself, the scenery being shifted about.
