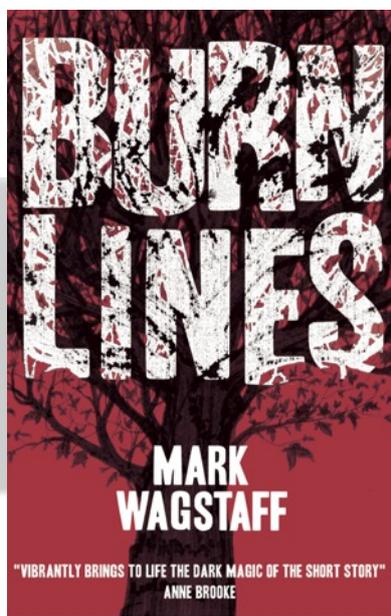


FENNEL BUTTER

Mark Wagstaff

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I'm luckier than some, though that's not saying much. Own hips, own teeth, own hair – thank goodness – and *active*. That's so important. You don't see at first all the ways that age takes bites from your life. Decay starts small – I mean, how many people actually *know* how much cloudier their hearing is than last year? We disguise ageing in circumstance – if the stairs knock you out, it's because you're had a busy day, not because your knees are starting to give.

For me, the realisation of a more brusque change to life was when friends started having complex conditions that weren't resolved by a day with their feet up and a decent red. When people my age – or who I considered my age – began to stay over in hospital and didn't always come out better. When they started having those complications only other people have. And the family deaths, of course. Perfectly sprightly relatives succumbing to natural causes. I hardly saw a family funeral until my forties. Then came a ghastly decade-long clamour of the things, reaching crescendo with siblings who couldn't be *that* old, *surely*. Now the funeral traffic has died away, which seems rather worse.

Still, I'm luckier than those who need nursing. If I had to go to some old folks' home I'm not sure what I'd do. It's pleasant enough here: these bungalows are very solidly built and if you're not fond of possessions there's plenty of space. It can be a little chilly out here in winter and the shops are a rather long bus ride away, but at this time of year the gardens are superb. I never was one for weeding – I'm more partial to cut flowers – so to enjoy all this fruit of someone else's efforts makes the charges very worthwhile. At least, I think so. The charges are quite an *issue*, as my grandchildren say, for some of the people here. Really, you'd think they lived scot-free all their lives, the fuss they make. I've all but given up those endless, dreary meetings where we argue about a few pounds here or there. Of course people here are poor: we're all poor or we'd have servants. But we are where we are, as my grandchildren say. Indeed, we are where we are.

There was all that predictable thrashing around the last time the garden contract was renewed. All these elderly ladies and gents – well, elderly to me – disputing how many times *precisely* a year the grass should be cut. The poor little girl from the housing association trying to explain *efficiency* and *cost/benefit* to old loves who can't even make an efficient summer pudding. I was hooked on a rather good thriller and only surfaced to vote.

I've a lovely view from the sitting room of lawns running down to the river, the island beds of peony and primrose; even those fussy box borders have grown on me, a little. Johnny's just trimmed them. I'm sure even the penny-pinchers have noticed Johnny's work. It's funny to think his secateurs could've slipped anywhere on the estate. The *community*, the old folks like to say. It's an estate. Even professionals have off-days, and what a misfortune for Johnny that the secateurs slipped and he pruned his hand while tidying my evergreens. He really bled most impressively. I was reminded of the children when they knocked lumps out of themselves. I don't mean that he bawled and pointed incoherently out a hastily-opened door; I mean because of the sprightly way blood consumed his hand and wrist, decorated his shirt, his trousers, the York path and evergreens a really spicy maroon. It's not the same with the grandchildren. Their parents are rather dreary about keeping them in. He needed a stitch, obviously, but I gave him a temporary patching and the old girls' hot sweet tea while waiting for the paramedics who, of course, know this place blindfold. I was rather glad of the distraction, if one can put it that way. I was assembling a rather stubborn layer cake and had lost some patience with it. I've always cooked with more brio than patience. Poor Johnny hadn't, I don't think, ever seen spatulas and measuring spoons actually *used* for something. I explained the mechanics of the affair and he told me rather wanly that his mother never made cakes. Then he volunteered that she used to buy those pre-cooked roast potatoes for Sunday lunch. I thought that rather sad for both of them.

It felt a bit silly, really, running him to ground in his toolshed with a leek and potato lattice. But I *had* said I'd make him something and guessed he'd want a manly lunch. Leeks and potatoes are that, if not much else. I also felt silly because he's rather a *young* man, with a mass of black hair he keeps greased in what I'd call rocker style; he has sideburns – always a cause for caution – and wears those singlet things young men wear, more concerned to air their muscles than they are for the cold or sharp tools. In fact, he looks what girls my age used to call – in rather a moon-struck whisper – *bad business*. That he has a motorbike is entirely proper; its mischievous chrome made me feel quite dull with my flaky-pastry gift.

I wasn't surprised he didn't bring back the dish, and only when he knocked my door the following week did I realise for the first time that we share our gardeners with other estates. Johnny tended our plants a

scant three days a week; his absence so obvious and easily explained , I instantly felt a vertiginous and rather queasy sensation towards those other places, a sensation that – on a colour chart – would have shone green as the lawn. He said he enjoyed the lattice in an offhand but meant way. I cast around for what was fresh and foisted some buttery biscuits on his lean physique. He told me when he was a child, his mother could only buy broken biscuits, his tone held so much wounded truculence I heard myself say he was always welcome to take pot luck. After he'd gone, and I'd cleared the plates, I sat in the bedroom and stared at the mirror a long time.

My husband, rest his soul, was never *bad business*, though his rich seam of officer-grade peculiarity kept our marriage the right side of jolly. When he died, I may have believed that the house was too big for me. Or possibly I just agreed when the children said it was. Or more likely, I thought nothing at all but just wanted to grieve without malign fears of the children scrapping for money. I sold up and gave them their share, to be sad without distractions. To my shame, I didn't listen to the grandchildren who demanded how *could* I sell such a place, with so many rooms to hide in, such attics for secret games; that wonderful garden. My husband, straight from work, always inspected the garden; if there was anything amiss, he'd dive in, regardless of collar and cuffs. I have an enduring vision of him in a three-piece double-breasted suit and chain, his hat discarded, his hair awry, ripping and pawing ground elder. I'd be the cross little woman, shrewish at laundry costs, relishing the games he let me play; every day he was spared and I loved him. I don't quite recall how that became the children selling the house.

I learnt soon enough when I moved that many here are quite mad. I've heard old dears complain that the morning starts too brightly, the birdsong too sharp; the plants over-shine, their flowers *just* too garish; that the gardeners, Johnny especially, are an extravagance we should decline. "How much," said one, "are we paying him to run that infernal *machine*?" But I've a lovely view. The river beyond the lawns is fenced and out of bounds, especially to those of us a touch confused, to help them dodge being found, bloated and beatific, between the sewage works and the sea. We can look at the river from a carefully managed distance. But if you're active, with your own hips, in trousers and sensible shoes, climbing the fence beside that low tree isn't so martial a task. The river's a fine spot for lunch.

Looking forward to an especially tricky police procedural, I was surprised that someone found my lunch spot first. Surprised but not *too* cross. He was leaning back, asleep or with his eyes closed to the sun,

plugged into his music player, with his shirt off. I know of course young men these days depilate like duchesses, but his was the smoothest male chest I'd seen since my sons were children. Not that there was anything childlike to his physique. For the briefest second, I hotly regretted my old cords, dowdy shoes, indifferent shirt and overdue hair. Till I remembered I'm not thirty anymore.

I wasn't dawdling, really not, but he opened his eyes and I *had* to say hello not to be rude. He didn't move, didn't reach for his shirt, but stayed wholly comfortable-looking in my favourite place. He asked where was I going, as though I might actually *be* going somewhere, and I hotly regretted packed lunch in a bag not a hamper. He said he should get some food and, well: it's good manners to share.

At the first bite of Wensleydale and rocket, he stopped and stared at the sandwich like someone who'd just regained consciousness. He asked why was it spicy; I told him: fennel butter. My mother and grandmother made all kinds of butter: a skill my sisters and I received as family wisdom, sworn to preserve till everything that could be was pureed, pulverised and rendered warm on wholemeal. Cumin and saffron were my husband's favourites, but he had upcountry tastes; it's always been fennel for me.

Johnny said, as I rather expected, that marge was his family staple. "Nothing wrong with that," I assured him. The doctor tells me to eat marge. Between fulsome bites, he surprised me by remembering that I'm called Margaret – I told him when he hurt his hand but young men forget. But he didn't call me Margaret. Nor Maggie, which I loathe. He called me Mags. Sat with his shirt off in my favourite place by the river, eating my fennel butter, he called me Mags. And rather a shy little, thin little, daft little doomed sort of feeling woke from some dark little deep buried cave. When he'd eaten, Johnny lay languid; I had cramp, but wilfully wouldn't show it; indeed, I affected a wholly back-breaking girlish suppleness, stretched back, hands flat to the dust, as though I was wearing a sweater, culottes and gypsy hoops. I thought if I could just avoid a seizure I'd be fine.

Johnny seemed to have had an interesting life. With sons, one never expects what young men say is true, but I could believe he'd been in prison. Some young men find trouble as easily as a new girlfriend. Prison, he said, was where he'd got into weights and gardening. He said the food was better than home. I found that sweet as marzipan and may, perhaps, have thrown back my head to laugh a bit more than needed. But it was cool – as everyone now seems to be saying again – because he didn't make me feel silly. And with thirty-odd years of my

husband's schemes and obsessions, I'd stories to tell in return. Johnny appreciated my husband's banzai approach to gardening and I got rather an odd warmth thinking that he thought my husband rather fun. My husband was fun, in a relentlessly suburban-bedlam sort of way. Johnny asked what I did. For a job, he meant, in the real world. I dearly wanted to tell him. But I couldn't; I suppose I'm not meant to even now. So I dutifully said what I *am* meant to say: "Civil servant, *terribly* unimportant," surprised at how shoddy it felt to lie. Johnny said he thought I must be a cook; he was way too young to know that girls used to learn these things. That his mother seemed to know nothing of food turned my warmth rather chilly: too neat a reminder of how much younger his mother would be than my mother. Than me.

Young men were always *bad business*, from back in the days of spivs and swells, the cads with a marked deck. The chaps my huffy father would call a *rum sort*: bad for discipline, his peaceable kingdom defined by short hair, clean nails and mute fortitude in the ranks. But something happened, I think, sometime between the A-Bomb and Sputnik, when the world where ladies made butter vanished, faded away, as indifference stopped being a sickness and became an achievement. I'm not blameless: I was busy, hardly a shining mother, never perhaps as interested in domestic things as I ought to be – aside from cooking, and even that was a selfish pleasure. I was hardly a shining mother that lunchtime: I didn't mention my children, nor grandchildren, the whole hour I sat with Johnny. I never got round to family; it was a very quick hour.

He had to get back to work: it was too easy to tell in his job what hadn't been done. As a charge payer, I should have *insisted* he get back to his trowel but felt oddly lax, disinclined just then to support the more protestant virtues. He sprang up, buttoning his shirt with deft, back-bedroom haste; a young man's lack of need to check how he looked. He sprang up, but I had a problem; a horrid, humiliating problem. My leg cramped: I couldn't stand. I wanted, so wanted, to leap to my feet, jiggling up on my toes, swirling my own hips in that look-at-me way the world and I used to find so endearing. When the young men who were *bad business* would chortle how the colonel's daughter was a *sport*.

As pain swept into my spine, I hotly, vividly, hated everything I'd done, everything since those days. A strident voice – wholly false, I'm sure – scolded that I'd gone wrong, been afraid, taken the one dusty turn that leads sure as tram lines to old age in a leased bungalow, fading in quiet times. But in the nastiness of it all I remembered enough

of the sporting girl to know young men want to be *men*, to show off how they're *men* all the time. Without a word, wilfully cleansing pain from my face, I stuck out a hand, tinkled my fingers: a wave any passing chap would know as signal to manliness.

Johnny knew. He clasped my wrist in a warmly-scarred young paw, put his other hand behind my shoulder, propelled me bodily to my feet in such a tendon-wrenching move; the ghastly cramp transmuted into the bends. Then, perhaps feeling awkward, perhaps feeling the job was done, he let go.

Pierced with pins and needles, I swayed, flailed, battered my hand across his chest, grabbed his arm so vice-like his muscles tensed as though reliving a policeman's accusing grip. I may have said I was sorry. I was: a sorry old specimen altogether. I may have gabbled some explanation; a leg wound: more of a party piece than dreary sciatica. I might've said a motorbike smash. It's hard to recall: the pain was intense, his arms braced me quite tightly. My face close to his; I coloured, light-headed and sick.

When the weather's poor, he might call for lunch; when it's fine, I take pot luck by the river. It's quite a cottage industry, keeping him in fennel butter and the walnut bread he wolfs by the fistful. Sometimes I take him lunch in the shed: he'll pose on the workbench while I perch on the back of his bike. He says we should go for a spin – if that's what *flame the lanes* means. It may not be *quite* true I've ridden before, but I've ridden pushbikes and horses, and I was trained long, long ago to adapt to new situations. I've so many stories: I wonder if, sometime, I told him whether lean-faced men in telltale suits would still hustle me in for a quiet chat in some windowless office. That could be rather exciting. I think Johnny would approve.

I'll probably live here the rest of my life: grow old and sick and cramped and small, the world quite rightly not caring. My children will visit: we'll stare at each other rather like we've always done. The grandchildren won't bother, too disappointed when I can't rough-and-tumble anymore. I'll read every thriller until my eyes go, till my brain can't think further than hot, sweet tea. And regret and probably cry when Johnny packs up and goes. When he leaves as, quite rightly, boys do.

But that's all next year sometime, beyond pumpkin masks and bonfire marshmallows and Christmas cake. With amaretto butter, of course. When your stock of tomorrows starts to run small, then today

becomes rather important. Today I'm busy. I've a young man to fuss, I've fennel butter to make. And for now – and now's what matters – I've a lovely view.

WRITER PROFILE



Mark Wagstaff was born in Whitstable in 1966 and has lived in London since the 1980s. A transient decade of short-term lets and long-term parties took a bite out of him and while in recovery he started to work through the questions and fears that were to frame his first two novels. Mark's first published story *Up West* appeared in Writers' Forum in 1999. Although a very brief piece, it marked the beginning of his emergence as a distinctive London writer. Catching time at the kitchen table while his young children were asleep, Mark developed his first collection *Blue Sunday Stories* and through the early years of the century steadily grasped towards the individual style which makes his work so recognisable. In 2010 *Allotments* became his first story published in the United States. Mark has won several UK and US awards. In 2012 he won the Machigonne Fiction Contest with title story *Burn Lines*, which is the title story in his first InkTears collection scheduled for publication in the spring of 2014. For further information and a special launch offer, please register here.

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