

Bella

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For the restless ghosts of the Black Country
and my uber-wenches, Gemma and Elsbeth.

Foreword

by Anthony Cartwright

I think everyone who grows up in the Black Country one day asks themselves, in one way or another, *Who Put Bella Down the Wych-Elm?* The enigmatic strangeness of the question, literal and metaphoric, seems to represent some half-hidden truth about the place and the people. R. M. Francis's *Bella* is a kind of Black Country folk-horror, a re-imagining of the very real tragedy, itself become something like myth.

The story is told as if a set of characters, a babble of voices, suddenly entered a George Shaw landscape - Midland, Edgeland, Gothic - living lives among the streets of terraced houses and estates between "places that are not even towns" and on the edge of even more in-between places, where the Wych-Elm grows. But the most important thing is how the voices we hear seem somehow both central to a culture (English, Industrial, Midland) and marginalised by it (whether by sexuality, gender, background, religion, the collapse

of industry). Thus Timothy Carmody - gay, Irish, Catholic, English, Black Country hard man and victim all at the same time - and all the other complex characters within. This sense of the in-between, of the weird and the eerie, as Mark Fisher would have it, in both the people and place it depicts, is the great triumph of this novel.

Bella

You call me Bella. I am always here, lurking. I am just out of sight. Just out of reach. I am the mar. I am the foxy infraction. Never living, never dead. A shade that germs into and out of you.

1

Michelle

I doh believe in witches or ghosts or whatnot, but there was summat about Saltwells and Bella, in one form or another, 'er was always theya. Tim said 'e was an atheist but 'e still day walk under ladders an' 'e 'ated black cats. Iss the same wi' Bella, even if you think iss just a story, you still doh wanna test it. Tim said 'e knew wharr 'ad 'appened.

I needed to know.

I remember drivin' up from The Delph towards Cradley, an' we were stopped at the lights at the top 'a Quarry Bank. Tony was with me an' 'e'd pointed it out. Iss a crossroads 'ere an' iss all concrete, brick, tarmac. Iss grey, cold an' stoney. Back in the day they'd mek nails an' chain if ya went down one road, an' they'd mek glass if you turned around. Most 'a that 'ad died

out so it was just a shadow of a place. A junction just to get to somewhere else. The lights at Quarry Bank am four-way with three lanes at each openin', iss busy wi' people headin' to the shops, to work, iss always busy an' ya never gerr'across, you've always gorra wait. It ay nothin' 'cept a border between a couple 'a places that ay proper towns anyroad. Tony was wi' me an' 'e sid it.

See, 'round 'ere weem always lookin' back. Weem built from what come before us. Chains, steel, nails. Soot an' smoke in the skies. Most of iss gone now. We've still got red bricks an' concrete, corrugated metal an' all that. But we ay got forges. We ay got mystic blacksmiths. We've got almost-barren high streets. We've got slick, glass, brass an' plastic we've built over the works with – stockin' rows 'a dead 'eaded credit controllers, PPI reps, retail consultants. We've got Merry Hill – an indoor town that spreads out in sanitised pound-zones. Then there's what's left-over. Little dry suburbs that sink between 'ills, where dead factories am wrapped in weeds, an' big 'ousin' estates, all wet an' grey, an' all punctured in electric light – them no go zones unless you'm from theya – each zone 'as iss own 'alf deserted Labour club, iss own brand 'a menacin' teen, iss own birr'a cut or brook or strange patch 'a green land that mopes between a terrace row an' the mechanic's.

Tony was wi' me an' 'e sid it.

Pokin' out through a crack in the curb was a thin, green vine, an' on the vine were tiny green tomatoes.

Tony said it was like Detroit, 'ow it was once the biggest industrial hub in the US,'ow nature 'ad started to claim back the city now it'd run iss course. There was summat frightnin' about that: it come out 'a the ground, thass what them meant to do, but the ground was meant to be controlled by us, not weeds. I wondered what else was lurkin' under our industry, waitin' to come back. It med me think of Saltwells an' where wid play when we was kids.

Who put Bella down the Wych-Elm?

It was everywhere – this tag. Chalked up over the red and grey bricks on our estate. This question – this warning. Most of us 'ad got used to it. Just walked past the signs on the Wrenna, down Cinder Bank or Lodge 'ill, like it was just another daily blot on a daily-blotted place.

Bella was a wench who'd bin found in Saltwells one night, 'er was. 'Er was dead – just bones. Er'd bin stashed theya donkeys agoo and no one 'ad ever found out how. So a bunch on 'um 'ad started paintin' it up on the walls of old factories – *Who put Bella down the Wych-Elm?*

When I sez donkeys agoo, I mean before the steelworks closed and before busses stopped comin' through and before job shop queues. It wor non 'a our lot, it was before they'd built houses on the Sledmere. Nan 'ad said it went back to when they was kids in the fifties. Some on 'em, the old 'uns in Turner's, 'ud say it was saft – just a local story dads'd use to shut the kids up. But some on 'em, some said it happened just like

the story said it 'ad.

After a night 'a suppin' in the pub, one 'a them old sorts boat men and tinkers used – not like Turner's or The 'Ope where wid sink shit-tasting shots and bark along to Karaoke tracks – an old one like Pardoe's with wood an' brass an' open fires: Bella 'ad 'ad 'er fill an' stumbled home. 'Er must 'a got lost 'cause 'er ended up facin' the wrong way in Saltwells, and maybe 'er was followed and maybe 'er'd pissed someone off, or maybe 'er fancied a bit 'a one 'a the scrap men or somethin', 'cause 'er wor alone. Whoever 'ad bin wi 'er an' whyever they'd bin theya we doh know. We just know the'd fucked 'er, took a stone or summat to 'er yed an' cut 'er up.

Years later, a few kids from Derby End Scouts 'ad gone out trackin' or somethin' an' they'd looked inside this big old tree. A Wych-Elm. Iss still theya too.

Most 'a Saltwells is thin, light coloured trees an' bushes, there's bigguns too but not like the Wych-Elm. Most 'a Saltwells is paths, an' it would 'a bin back in the fifties, I reckon. You can follow the paths down the quarry an' through the bluebells an' you wouldn't 'a thought you was still in Netherton, with all the greens an' browns an' the almost quiet. You gorra know where to find the Wych-Elm. It 'ay on the paths. You cut through a thicket up by where it meets the Res an' you follow the skinny route med out 'a the bits 'a broken ground med by the few broken sorts who went lookin'. The Wych-Elm sorta sits in a circle, where nothin' else grows around it. It 'ay tall, but iss fat. Iss dark an'

leafless an' brittle an' iss gorra big laceration down the front – thass where they'd found 'er. Them Scouts looked inside an' pulled out 'er cracked-up skull. Then the police found bits 'a old shoes an' cloth an' a few other bones around the circle 'a ground. But it'd bin too long and no one knew who'd bin theya or why or nothin'. So the funny fuckers 'round 'eya starting writing *Who put Bella down the Wych Elm?* on all the walls.

I doh even know where the name Bella comes from.

'Er gets under our skin too, Bella does. Like the tomatoes finding roots in cracked concrete.



Tim 'ad bin about thirteen. His family 'ad moved to the Sledmere when 'e was ten. At the beginning 'a the eighties they'd bought their council house down Lodge 'ill, 'is Dad built a porch and med a drive where the front lawn was. 'E knew people who'd get stuff on the cheap and e'd fix anything. They sold up and now had a spot down 'ere. 'E wor a normal lad, Tim. Not dangerous but not the sem as the other lads on the estate. Always on 'es own, 'e was. Every now an' then you'd see 'im ferritin' about. He'd be iverin' about in the bushes that separated our houses an' the cut. We'd be on the benches an' the walls, smokin' fags an' loffin' at the lads who tried to chuck bibbles off the yeds 'a geese. No one knew what 'e was up to. The lads 'ated 'im, but knew his Dad'd fuck 'em up if anythin' 'appened. Me an' Gem knew 'is mom, 'er worked with

Nan, we day wanta be 'is mate but we day wanta pick on 'im either. 'E was odd, Tim. Not dangerous, but not the sem as us.

Early on at school there was times when 'e'd try an' fit in, burr'e was crap arr'it. Jay an' Sam was 'oldin' forth by the sports 'all. Thass where we all hung out on break. Tim an' 'is lot hung on the steps next to it. They was always on the edge of it.

"My old mon's gorra CD player," Jay said. "'E's got ten CDs, iss bostin'."

We day think CDs'd last then. Me an' Gem taped stuff off the radio.

"Wass wrong wi' tapes an' records?" Gem asked. "It all works anyroad. Yo' cor tape CDs can yo'?"

Then Tim cries over, "the mind is like an umbrella. It's most useful when open."

We loffed our 'eads off. Tim was called Brolley for about a year. *Ay Brolley, yo' wanker!* Thass when it started really. 'E was alright, we just found a gap.

'E day do 'imself any favours neither. In science one day the lads was tekkin' the piss an' 'is response was:

"Finished my job at the umbrella factory . . . I was only covering for someone."

That day do 'im any favours. 'E tried it again a few times.

"Whatcha call a parrot wi' an umbrella? Polly unsaturated."

Thass warr'e was to us. Someone who'd say weird stuff. Someone you'd see werritin' about in the bushes.

'E told me years later. We'd gone to the re-opening of The Bell in Stourbridge an' 'e got me a drink and we stayed in touch after that. 'E told me e'd bin wankin'. E'd bin obsessed with it back then. Said he couldn't 'a done it at home 'cause 'e's Dad used to slap 'is mom when someone kissed on *Neighbours* or *Corrie* an' 'er day look away, so 'e'd 'a bin missin' limbs if 'is Dad 'ad sin him bein' a sinner. So 'e 'ad to goo outta the house, but not where the other kids were. Mebe thass why. Ya 'ear about it, doh ya? About people who cor do summat, so it meks 'em wuss fer doin' it. 'Iss that old thing about seein' a sign like doh walk on the grass, or summat, an' then y'am compelled to do it, even though ya day even think about it before.

Stourbridge was the posh side, really. Yo'd end up in more fights on the high street theya, 'cause the posh kids couldn't 'andle theya ale an' they could afford to tek coke, an' thass a shit cocktail wi' dick'eads. But they had farmer's markets an' Waitrose, craft beers an' poetry nights an' all that. Tim loved that stuff. They re-opened The Bell as a gay bar. That was a big deal 'round 'ere. Me an' our Gem went to the openin' an' thass where we sid Tim. The place was packed. Coloured lights flashin' an' music pumpin' out. Took us about fifteen minutes each time at the bar. Thass where we sid Tim. Me an' Gem was sat at a table by the bar an' through the rabble I sid a lanky bloke starin' at us. 'E 'ad a white shirt on, black trousers an' a black waistcoat. 'E stood out. Just stood theya starin'. 'E took a couple 'a steps towards us. I thought

I was gonna 'av to get cute with 'im.

"Thass Brolley! Thass Tim Carmody, ay it?" Gem said. It was. 'E strutted over to us. Starin'.

"We ay interested," I said. That was before Gem clocked 'im. "I gerr 'er drinks," pointin' at our Gem. "An' 'er gess mine."

"No chance of a drink with an old school mate then?" 'E said.

Thass when our Gem clocked 'im. We loffed. 'E gorr'us a drink. Thass where 'e started tellin' us about Saltwells, an' Bella an' 'is weird habits.

Me an' Tim stayed in touch. I had to find out. I needed it. We'd meet up at The Fox and Grapes or The Red Crow. No one knew us up theya. 'E said 'e knew about Bella.

Stan

Bella stories 'ave bin abaart since the 1950s, ay they, mebe earlier than that. Saltwells an' Bella an' all that gerr under our skin 'ere, they do. Like 'er's on the edge of us. Everyone's gorra story. Most am Billy bullshitters, ay they.

Our Michelle's different though, ay 'er. Me an' 'er Nan 'ave looked after 'er since 'er was a bab. 'Er dad's inside an' her mom's jed. Thass all arm tellin'. D'ya get me?

Now, the night 'er dad, my own son, got took in by the coppers, our Michelle, only three, 'er was, 'er went

missin', day 'er. 'Er gorr out somehow. Found 'er way down Lodge 'ill an' med 'er way into Saltwells, day 'er.

We doh know wharr 'appened but they'd found 'er out in Saltwells woods. At the Wych-Elm, in tears. Screamin' an' blartin', 'er was, wor 'er. 'Er was in shock, they said. Took 'er nan abaart three hours to calm 'er down an' I 'ad te sup six pints, before I did, day I.

Te this day, no one knows wharr 'appened. 'Ow did 'er get out? Why did 'er goo te the Wych-Elm? Te this day, no one knows.

Me and' 'er nan 'ave promised te not tell 'er a thing, ay we. We'll play along with the stories an' whatnot but 'er wo' 'ear the truth 'a that night an' 'er wo' 'ear what 'er old mon did te 'er mom. 'Er nan enjoys 'erself with it – 'er meks fun out 'a tales, doh 'er. I'll just stay quiet. Bella gets te all of us in some way, though, doh 'er.

Our Michelle's different though, ay 'er. You'll 'ear 'er say *I need to know an' I've gorra find out*, 'er'll say. We all know the stories, doh we. 'Er wants to figure it out proper, 'er does. You'll 'ear 'er talkin' to the wench in Turner's an' the old blokes who used to bait the woods. 'Er never less it goo, 'er doh. Like there's a trace from that night thass infected 'er, ay it.

Tim

Honestly, I used to go into the line of trees and bushes between the estate an' the cut. It seemed safe, like, there wor no paths, like or nothin'. Honestly, you could

tell people 'ad been there from bits of litter an' the odd bit of clothin' left by a tramp. I found a spot that you could just about get one body into, like, get down on my knees, like, pull open a few pages of porno an' toss off. It only ever took a few minutes, like. It was safer in there but there was summat about bein' outside too. Honestly, I liked bein' close to home, bein' unseen, like, but close to bein' seen.

I think I was okay an' not okay back then. I was alright on my own an' I day really need loads of muckers an' all that like. But, you know, honestly, school sort of does strange stuff to us, doh it? The cool guys like Jay an' Sam would all be cantin' about sex an' stuff an', like, there was part of me that wanted to measure up to that too.

We was different. We was from Lodge 'ill an' even though that's just on the end of Netherton, like, it's still not Sledmere. The other thing was my Dad an' our Irish blood an' the catholic shit. Honestly, all that, an' the talk at school, got me wankin'. It'd got quite bad towards the back end of that summer. I was desperate to get laid. I must've been about thirteen or fourteen and I'd go out in the mornin' and toss off, then again after lunch and before it got dark. It was a habit like. I just got through most of the day an' measured it out in wanks, to be honest.

I had a stash of pornos I'd found down by the Dudley Tunnel but by the end of summer it'd all gone stale, like. I dunno if kids find pornos these days. We doh really have the same spaces for 'em, to be honest. I was

desperate to get laid. Thass why I did it, like. Thass why I went to Nicki.

See, I had a couple of mates, Rich and Dave, but we spent all our time talkin' about Gary Newman an', Jem an' the holograms, like, playin' with our Wackywall walkers. We'd race 'em down the sports'all windows. Honestly, I couldn't talk about stuff like this with them until a few years on, an' even then it was different. But I was obsessed with it. It had to be outside. It had to be often. Then, it grows, like. It grew. I had to get laid. Thass why I went to Nicki.

I didn't know what I was doing or what I wanted at first, like. It started with the wankin', moved on to the porn – I had to collect it, then I started tekkin' bits of fruit down the bushes with me. Mom's Cantaloupe, like.

At first I had to come up with a plan to get over there. I decided to get Dad's lawnmower and pretend I was gonna make some pocket money around the estate. They were happy with this to be honest.

“E's got your spirit, Carrick, ay 'e”, Mom 'ad said.

Now, you cor just knock on one door, get laid and then give up the game, so I thought I'd start on my street first and work around to Nicki's. Mowed about ten fuckin' lawns before I got to hers. Everyone kept sayin', like, Ah, iss Carrick's kid, goo on then, Bab. I gee yer a quid.

I 'ad to cut the wankin' down big time, like.

Honestly, I did three lawns a day. 'Round about. Then got to Nicki. That old wench had me do front an' back. She had me do what Mick shoulda done before it

started, to be honest.

As soon as she opened the door she knew what was happenin' – I knew an' she knew an' we still had to go through the motions. Wust fuckin' foreplay I've ever add, like.

Honestly, it was boilin' that summer. An' her lawn was massive. Took ages. I could feel her lookin' over me as I worked. Even that got me up a little, like.

“You look like you need a squash,” she said to me.

So I went in an' had a squash. There she was, honestly, dressed in her fake silk robe, like, sittin' me down at the table, touchin' my shoulders for a moment too much as she led me, leanin' over me as she placed the tumbler down. Eyelashes flickerin', like, lips poutin', like, cleavage heavin' – all the clichés a virgin wants and needs. Everythin' she asked me I just nodded or shook my head or gid her a one word answer. We spoke about Mick and me Mom and Dad. What year of school I was gonna be in.

“Av ya sin Rambo yet? 'E's a strong lad, that Stallone, ay 'e? Are yo' strong, Tim?”

She sat me down on the sofa and knelt down in front of me. I arched my back and lifted my arse as she slipped my joggers off.

“Looks like yom ready already,” she said.

An' I was, to be honest. I just nodded, like. I day speak to her. She straddled me an' slipped her knickers to one side as she sat down, easin' my cock into 'er.

“Just let Nicki tek care 'a ya, Bab.”

You know what it's like, the first time like, well, maybe you do. You sorta imagine the feeling beforehand, like, but it ay the same. Honestly, I don't think anyone has that total bodily – pins an' needles – shiver – feelin' until you do it for the first time. It was warm an' wet an' I felt close an' safe ... but terrified too.

Honestly, I was a stallion. Nicki was impressed.

“Bloody ‘ell, bab, this ay yer fust time is it?”

I nodded and smiled, like, an' she went quicker but nothin' was happenin'. She didn't give up though.

Honestly, after about an hour or so, I dunno, summat happened. Changed the mood, like. We were at it, an' she was grindin' an' all, an' we must 'a been in the zone 'cause we didn't hear Mick come in.

The door to the front room opened an' he stepped in, like, an' we didn't realise until he spoke.

“Sorry, Nic, I day realise yow ‘ad company.”

I tried to jump up, like, but Nicki 'ad me pinned, an' you remember, she was a big girl an' I wasn't exactly Chuck Norris. My heart went double-bump-stop - dum-dum, like. Mouth dry, like. Nicki waved her hand at him – like she would if she was busy makin' his tea an' he was pesterin' or summat. Just a sorta casual wave, like. An' Mick, he sat down on the arm on the chair opposite and watched it.

Honestly, he sat watchin' his wife fuckin' a teenager, arms folded like the news was on the telly. He sat watchin', an' I watched back. Watched his grubby, dry hands, his tight jeans, stained with three days travel,

his creased and stubbled face, his wide eyes, pale blue, staring at us. It wasn't a pervy look, like, an' it wasn't angry. It was the look of a man who was relaxed. Ya know, like the look on a man's face when he takes the first sip of his pint on a Fridee? So he has his first sip. He does it every week, so he knows what it's like – it's a knowable enjoyment like – that's the look he had. An' I looked back. An' she was still ridin'. An' thass when I felt it. Thass when I come . . . It was strange.

Honestly, I'd come loads of times, as I said. I knew what to expect. But this blew me head off. It ran right up my spine and down to my toes, like, and I thought I might faint.

As soon as my dick stopped twitchin', Nicki got off, did up 'er robe, like, an' walked into the kitchen with a smile.

"Cheers, bab," 'er said. "Show 'im aart, Mick".

Mick put one hand on my back an' gid my shoulder a squeeze, like. Walked me to the door.

"Yo'm Carrick Carmody's lad, ay ya?"

I nodded an' walked off. I day say goodbye or thanks or nothin'. Honestly.

"See yo' soon, youngun."

And that was that, like.

Joyce

I still have nightmares. Most nights that Wych-Elm appears in my dreams. With its twisting, spindly, spider leg branches all coiled and curled into each

other, ferreting their way out of that hulk of trunk – all wet, brown, mossy. It loomed over the place. It looms over my dreams. I could be dreaming of all sorts of lovely things; big feasts, lottery wins, family parties, whatever, then it'll come. The Wych-Elm calls.

The dream breaks with the sight of those old fractured factories, the ruins and waste grounds of concrete, brick and rust, and then the tiny path that leads between the empty works and into Saltwells. It's a dream when you walk it now, really. You go from the little row of shops with neon lights – people putting the gas on their cards, buying their Friday chips, traffic passing outside – past the church and round through the terraces in Derby End. Then you face the grey and orange of the decayed metalwork machines, you cut through it and suddenly you're not in Netherton anymore, you're in the green and brown, the moist dirt of Saltwells. You trip up on nature. Nature trips you up.

Anon

I was in the Bull most nights. We all went for at least a couple.

We sid 'er a few times an' we day trust 'er. It was me what pointed it out to Alfred. Yo' spot a stranger a mile off round 'ere. Weem together. We look after each other. We goo to the sem church, the sem pub, the sem factory floor. Weem the sem. Weem together.

I wo say we enjoyed it. It 'ad to be done. But we was

proud, in a way. We was proud of each blow. Each time the burch came down on that 'arlots flesh.

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About the Author

R. M. Francis is a writer from Dudley. He completed his PhD at the University of Wolverhampton for a project titled *Queering the Black Country* and graduated from Teesside University for his Creative Writing MA.

He's the author of four poetry chapbooks, *Transitions* (The Black Light Engine Room Press, 2015), *Orpheus* (Lapwing Publications, 2016), *Corvus' Burnt-Wing Love Balm and Cure-All* (The Black Light Engine Room Press, 2018) and *Lamella*, (Original Plus, 2019).