

I play  
the drums in a  
band called *okay*

SIDE A  
33 RPM



Toby Litt  
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Ticklish and addictive... responsible for half a dozen  
spasms of laughter so severe that my wife had  
to come downstairs to check on me'  
David Mitchell



I Play Drums in a Band Called Okay  
by  
Toby Litt

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## DOG # I

‘Wouldn’t the coolest thing now be to be Japanese, eh?’

We are in Rotterdam Europe lost in thick fog together.

‘A bridge over a river next to a church. Haven’t we walked past this once before?’

That’s me, name of Clap, dissecting the bridge-river-church interface. With me, Nippo-theorizing, is Syph.

We are from Canada. We are in a band called *okay*, lower case, italics. We are on our second European tour.

‘I mean, think about it. We can’t match those copycats for hipness. No way. You see, Clap, we’ve completely forgotten how to be ourselves. But *they* know how. They know that it’s about *choosing* who you want to be, not being destined to be anyone in particular. And they are better at choosing than we ever were.’

‘Can we sit down for a minute?’ I say. ‘I’m not feeling too great.’

‘When the Japanese are punks, they are the greatest punks ever; when they are rockabillys, not even Elvis can touch them.’

Twenty days in.

This is it – we have reached the point of self-annihilation. So much of what comprises who one is has been left behind. Jackson Browne found a phrase for it, Running On Empty. In this non-state you can go for two days without having a single real thought. *How did I get here?* – that is the thought that most intrudes. The non-thought is always – *next, next, next*. Next gig. Next girl. Next goodbye. Aspects of it I do sincerely appreciate – I love the sense of left-behindness. You never use a bar of hotel soap more than once – if at all. (And if you’re really sensible, you carry your own with you: so that’s not a very good example.) But if you don’t like

something – a magazine containing a bad review, a tape that's gone fucked in your Walkman – you just drop it. Within seconds, it is miles away. Another country. (As the lyrics to my favourite of our songs go: 'I've reached out in the dark to touch/Things a thousand miles away.') Similarly, if you freak out some girl and she has hysterics at you, she's two towns behind before her slap even hits your face. You become impervious to pain – of a non-serious sort. Self-harm becomes a bit of a game. (Not that *okay* are great ones for stage-diving. It's not part of our image.) You eat nothing but shit. You look like a piece of shit. And you talk shit a hundred per cent of the time.

Twenty days to go.

'You see them,' Syph continues to talk shit, 'walking around downtown – children dressed like souvenir teddy-bears – groups of girls with their heads close together and their hands over their mouths – couples holding hands, each so cool you can't decide between them – serious young men buying huge stacks of CDs – salarymen, who break into a sweat as they move from the pavement to the road – senior citizens in beige and fawn golfing clothing.'

I am the drummer. Syph is the lead vocalist. We have a bassist, Mono. We have a rhythm guitarist, Crab.

Our mothers did not call us by these names – though Syph's is starting to. None of us knows if she knows what it means.

'Do you remember when we were on tour in Tokyo?'

'I feel bad. I'm sitting down. You can keep walking.'

I sit down on a low concrete wall with black railings stuck in it looking out across a street of cobblestones and grey-green walls.

'Like, no-one gives blow-jobs like the Japanese. It's the kind of thing they probably have instruction manuals about that are a thousand years old. Like the Karma Sutra.'

'The *Kama Sutra* is Indian.'

I stand up, lean over the railings and puke into the hedge.

'They do ancient things with their tongues and with the roofs of their mouths.'

I hear a whining sound.

'Did you fart?' I ask.

Syph looks shocked. He can't remember.

'I don't think so,' he says. 'Was it in tune?'

I lean back over the railings and look beyond the hedge. I see a paw, an ear – black and white.

I turn back to Syph. I say: 'I think I just puked on someone's dog.'

'Are they Japanese?' he says, and does ancient things with his tongue.

'What are we going to do?' I ask.

'We need to score.'

Syph is right – we smoked the last of the grass before the border. Syph is superstitious about carrying grass over international divides. He says it has to do with Paul McCartney. But he is quite happy about having speed in his pocket while making passport control. Which means that, until we score some dope in each new city, he is unbearable. And because he is likely to speed his way into getting arrested, I always go with him to try and track something down. If we are lucky, there's someone from the local fan club to help us connect. But *okay* aren't very big in Rotterdam, as we are finding out.

'I'm going to have a look at it.'

'Whatever,' says Syph, and plucks his Marlboros from his suit pocket.

Members of *okay* wear suits at all times. We play gigs in suits and we play hockey in suits. It's part of our image.

Our music is slow and formal with lyrics about love and guilt. We also sing about the sea.

We sound like the Velvet Underground on quarter-speed.

Climbing over the railings feels surprisingly easy. I haven't eaten anything in two days. Maybe I am getting the better of gravity.

I fall into the hedge, branches digging into my legs through my suit.

With a flip of my arms I roll off onto a patch of grass.

'Are you okay?' says Syph.

'Dollar,' I reply, keeping very still.

Whenever one of us uses the name of our band in a context not relating specifically to our band, that person is required to put a dollar in the stash-pot. It is a band rule.

'You didn't break your back?'

'I'm fine,' I say. I haven't opened my eyes yet. I don't feel any pain in my body.

Then a warm wetness crosses my nose and I smell a bad smell. I open my eyes into the face of the dog.

'Hi,' I say.

It continues licking.

I'm not sure if the bad smell is the smell of the dog's breath or the smell of my puke, which runs all down the dog's back.

I roll away.

The dog tries to follow me, to carry on licking, but it is tied to the railings by its lead.

'You've gone all quiet,' says Syph, then laughs. 'Is the dog Japanese?'

'Throw me your smokes and your lighter,' I say.

He throws them. I light up. I throw them back.

'Shit,' he says. 'That almost went down the drain.'

'Sorry,' I say.

I lie on my side on the lawn in Rotterdam Europe looking at the dog.

It is a mongrel, black and white. It doesn't look like anything much. Except thin. It looks kind of bony and shaky. Like Syph.

To this day, he's never been able to find a pair of pants that stay up. His mother used to make him wear suspenders or dungarees. For a while his nickname was Huck.

The girls always loved him. Still do.

Some nights I get seconds and some nights thirds and

maybe once a tour I'll settle for fourths. But Syph always gets firsts.

We drummers have our own distinct kind of girls. They are enthusiastic long before you are successful and loyal long after you're shit.

Drummer-girls tend to have long hair and large breasts and bring their own contraceptives and leave when asked.

Lead-singer-girls, from what I've seen and heard of them, are model-like and neurotic and bring drugs and want to do really weird sex-things on you so that you never forget them.

Some nights Syph doesn't even get laid, because none of the girls in that town comes up to his high standards. But that is rare. Syph's standards vary from town to town. Sometimes he ends up with Little Miss Rancid-and-a-half. (And I end up with her mutant grandmother.)

'It's a nice dog,' I say.

I look down at myself. There are a couple of muddy paw prints on my shirt. There is a bit of puke on my lapel.

'I think it's homeless.'

'Hey!' I hear Syph shout. 'Hey! Yeah!'

'Yeah?' I say.

'Come over here, I wanna talk to you. Yeah, come on. Yeah. Hi, I'm Steve.'

It was a girl. It wasn't hard to tell.

'What's your name?'

There is a giggle.

'I'm Inge.'

'Would you like a cigarette, Inge?'

'I have to go.'

'Hey, Syph!' I shout. 'Ask her if she knows whose dog this is?'

'Who is there?' Inge asks.

She was *so* beautiful. I just knew it was going to break my heart all over again to watch Syph closing his hotel door behind them as they walked in, smiling.

'That's my drummer,' said Syph. 'He's found a dog.'

Inge says, 'A dog?'

'Yeah,' says Syph. 'Woof-woof.'

Usually the beautiful ones laugh at Syph's less funny jokes. And the more beautiful they are, the more they laugh. And the sooner that door closes behind them.

I decide to stand up.

'Do you happen to know where we might chance upon some blow?' Syph is now doing his comic Englishman.

When I get to my feet I find myself standing face to face with an angel called Inge, with only a vomit-covered hedge separating us. Inge is very slim with short-cropped white-blond hair. Her eyes are dream-blue. And oh her skin . . .

'I'm Inge,' she says.

Syph rises to stand slim-hipped beside her.

'I'm Brian,' I say, hating my name totally.

'Where is the dog?' she asks.

'It's down here.' I point. 'Is this a garden or something?'

'I think it is a park,' Inge says. 'I will come round.'

Without turning towards Syph she starts off.

When she gets a few paces away Syph looks at me and mouths: *mine*.

I shake my head.

'Musical differences,' I say. This is the threat anyone in the band always makes when they take something so seriously that they are prepared to break up the band over it.

'I saw her first,' says Syph. 'You wouldn't even have said hi.'

'If it hadn't've been for the dog, she'd've walked off.'

'I tell you, if she goes for me I'm having her.'

Inge has found a way into the park.

'Hello,' she says, and holds out her hand to be shaken.

'Brian.'

She has an angel's ankles.

'Hi,' I say.

We shake.

Then she turns her attention seriously to the dog, address-

ing it in Dutch or whatever language they speak in Rotterdam. She can't fail to notice the puke, but she doesn't seem to associate it with me. I reach in my pocket and take out some gum to chew, to get rid of the smell.

Syph climbs up on the railings, jumps the hedge and joins us.

'What does he say?' I ask. 'Does he belong to anyone? Are they coming back?'

Inge says, 'I think he was left because they want him not.' 'Sometimes they have addresses on their collar,' says Syph. Inge says, 'There is no address.'

Inge stands up.

'What were you going to do?' she asks.

I look at Syph. Inge's eyes follow mine.

'Well,' he says, 'we are actually going to score some blow. Do you know where we could find some?'

Inge turns back to me – a little shrug, eyes rolling to the heavens-where-she-belongs.

'I was going to wait here to see if his owner came back. Then I was going to try and find a police station.'

And please can I kiss you?

'Give me your handkerchiefs,' she says.

Members of *okay* have handkerchiefs in the breast pockets of our suits at all time. It's part of our image.

'We must clean the dog.'

I hand over part of my image quite happily. Syph is flirting with the idea of refusing and of using his refusing as a way of flirting.

'Give it her,' I say.

Inge cleans most of my puke off the black and white dog with our handkerchiefs.

'You want them again?' she asks.

Syph says, 'Nope.'

I say, 'Yep.'

Inge hands them back, and I wrap them in the handkerchief I always keep in my side pocket for real use.

'I will take you to the police station,' Inge says.

Syph looks at me with *no way* in his eyes.

'But we have to be somewhere else,' he says. 'Don't we?'

'I'll come with you,' I say.

Inge kneels down and unties the dog's lead from the branch of the hedge.

'But we need to score,' says Syph.

'See you back at the hotel,' I say.

Inge looks inquiringly at both of us.

'Come on, boy,' I say to the dog.

Inge speaks to it in the Rotterdam language.

We walk off, leaving Syph behind.

Outside the park gates we turn left into the fog.

'You are drummer in a group?' Inge asks.

I am stunned. She's been paying more attention to Syph than she's let on. She really doesn't like him.

'Yeah. We're on tour. We're playing tonight at some club.' As I am halfway through the line, I go on with it anyway. 'Would you like to come?'

'Maybe,' she says. 'The police station is very close here.'

I hear footsteps running behind us in the fog. I don't need to look. Things have been going too well. It is Syph.

'I thought I'd lost you guys,' he says.

Inge leads us up to a doorway and into the police station.

Inge tells the policeman the story in the Rotterdam language. He then asks us to confirm a few details in English. It seems like Inge's left out any mention of the puke. I am glad of that.

We give them the name and address of our hotel.

Inge gives them her address and telephone number.

Inge and I say goodbye to the dog and watch the policeman take it off down a long white corridor.

On the foggy street outside the police station, Inge says, 'What is the name of your band?'

‘It’s *okay*,’ I say. ‘Spelt o-k-a-y.’ And just so she knows, I tell her the name of the club we’re playing at.

‘Do you know where we can score?’ whispers Syph.

Inge looks at him pitifully.

‘Come on,’ she says, and leads us off round the corner.

Unexpectedly, she stops, reaches into her rucksack and brings out a clingfilm-wrapped chunk of dope. She breaks off a corner and hands it to Syph.

‘God,’ he says. ‘The woman of my dreams.’

Inge turns to me.

‘You are a kind person,’ she says, and kisses me on the cheek. ‘Good-bye.’

I watch as she walks off into the fog.

Syph doesn’t even look. He is sniffing the dope.

‘This is really good shit,’ he says. ‘Let’s get back to the hotel.’

That evening the lighting set-up means that I am unable to see anything of the audience – it is just a sheet of white light which applauds whenever we finish a song.

Our set-list goes: ‘Thousand’, ‘Blissfully’, ‘Jane-Jane’, ‘Motherhood’, ‘Sea-Song #4’, ‘Hush-hate-hum’, ‘Walls’, ‘Queen Victoria’, ‘Long Cold Lines’, ‘With Strings’, ‘Gustav Klimt’ and ‘Work’. We encore with ‘Sea-Song #1’ and our cover of ‘Marquee Moon’.

Syph dedicates one song to a girl we met today. Thanks. For services rendered.

At the end of the encores, I walk straight up to the mic and say, ‘Inge, if you’re here, I’ll see you in the bar.’

Two Inges show up, neither of which is the right one.

Back in the dressing-room there is a drummer-girl but I brush her off.

‘I’m going for a walk,’ I say.

‘What?’ says Mono.

‘A walk?’ says Crab.

‘See you back at the hotel,’ I say.

‘Maybe,’ says Syph, who has one girl sitting in his lap and one opening him a beer.

For an hour or so, I wander about trying to find my way back to the park. But the fog has gotten even thicker and everywhere looks even more the same.

I stop a cab and tell the guy to take me back to the hotel.

Inge is sitting in the lobby with the black and white dog at her feet. As I walk up the dog I puked on recognizes me and starts to strain on its lead.

‘You didn’t come to the gig,’ I say.

‘I was there,’ she says. ‘I left.’

‘I asked you to meet me in the bar. Didn’t you hear?’

‘I thought you would get another girl. I wanted to see. I came to wait here.’

‘What, you were testing me?’

‘I don’t know,’ she says, smiling. ‘Maybe.’

‘Hi,’ I say to the dog.

Someone has obviously given it a bath. And love. He licks the salty spaces between my fingers, looking up at me with wet eyes.

‘Brian meet Brian,’ says Inge.

‘They let you keep it?’ I ask.

‘I went back and told them that the story we said before was a lie. I told them that I lived with you and that you didn’t want the dog, so that you made me give it to them. I told them that we had split up and that I wanted my dog back. They didn’t want the problem of a dog. They gave it to me without question.’

‘Do you have a boyfriend?’ I ask.

‘No,’ she says. ‘I have a dog called Brian.’

I am very close to saying woof-woof.

Just then, Syph and his two girls, both Japanese, plus Mono, Crab and their girls, plus several other girls and a couple of boys come through the hotel doors.

‘Great dope,’ Syph says to Inge as he walks up.

His girls are already getting jealous. They touch him even more.

‘Musical differences,’ I say to the whole band. ‘I’m afraid to say.’

‘Nice doggie,’ says Mono.

‘Irreconcilable musical differences.’

‘Really?’ asks Crab.

‘You have dope?’ asks one of Mono’s girls.

‘Yes,’ I say. ‘I think so.’

Syph says, ‘No way.’

‘Yoko,’ says Crab.

I smile at Inge and she smiles back.

‘Let’s go,’ Inge says.

And I say, ‘Okay.’

That last bit didn’t really happen. It’s just how I daydreamed it the following afternoon on the tourbus. Cologne was next. Then Munich. Then Berlin. Nineteen days to go. What really happened was that I went back to the hotel, alone, only to find Inge not there. No sign of that dog, either. Then I went for a walk, to try and find the park or the police station. But I couldn’t. I got lost again in the fog. Then I stopped a cab and told the guy to take me back to the hotel. That detail was true. Syph and the others were there in the bar with a group of girls. None of them was Japanese. But one of them I saw straight off was a drummer-girl. I think she had long hair and large breasts and brought her own contraceptives and left when asked. It’s just, you meet so many and remember so few.