

BREAKFAST WITH THE BORGIAS DBC PIERRE



Bestselling Booker-Prize-Winning author of VERNON GOD LITTLE

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About the Book

The setting: a faded, lonely guesthouse on the Suffolk coast. Outside, it's dark and very foggy. Inside, there's no phone or internet reception, no hope of connectivity with the outside world.

Enter Ariel Panek, a promising young academic en route from the USA to a convention in Amsterdam. With his plane grounded at Stansted, he has been booked in for the night at the guesthouse.

Discombobulated and jetlagged, he falls in with a family who appear to be commemorating an event.

But this is no ordinary commemoration. And this is no ordinary family.

As evening becomes night, Panek realises that he has become caught in an insidious web of other people's secrets and lies, a Sartrian hell from which there may be for him no escape . . .

About the Author

DBC Pierre has worked as a designer and cartoonist, and currently lives in Ireland. His first novel, *Vernon God Little*, won the 2003 Bollinger Everyman Wodehouse Award, the 2003 Whitbread Prize for Best First Novel, and the 2003 Man Booker Prize, and is sold in 43 countries.

His relationship with Hammer stretches back to earliest childhood. He describes never having been so chilled and intrigued as with the supernatural Hammer films he grew up with. Their effect was so great that he spent many schooldays drawing replica storyboards on cash register rolls, and holding showings for classmates on a shoebox cinema.

Also by DBC Pierre

Vernon God Little Ludmila's Broken English Lights Out in Wonderland Petit Mal

Breakfast with the Borgias

DBC Pierre



ACT ONE

TECHNOLOGY IS THE way, the truth and the life. Nobody comes to the light except through it. Algorithms are the new DNA, and just as well: because today the race is to the swift, the battle is to the strong, and time and chance happeneth not to them.

But the clock over platform four was analogue. Its second hand was red. On the tip a disc juddered like a wrecking ball smacking granite. As if time didn't want to pass. Still, it did crumble past until finally, at nine forty-eight this November eve, Zeva Neely had four minutes left for her phone to ring; or something was badly wrong.

She held it like a prayer book in her small gloved hands. It looked as if it had never rung before. Despite this lack of news it kissed her face with light, and that promise alone was enough to fix her to the screen. Perhaps because underneath lived anything important she had ever said or heard, she flicked through that history looking for clues about today. They were in a month-long conversation that had ended abruptly yesterday. Her chat was green and his was white, on a wallpaper of hearts and dynamite:

ARI: If you trust me what's the problem?

ZEV: Oh now it's date rape, thanks.

ARI: You said you would like it too.

ZEV: Don't tell me what I said, Ariel.

She shivered. Bruxelles-Midi station was glacial. If the device didn't ring or flash a message before her train arrived she would shatter inside. She shouldn't even board. She started to wish the train had struck a bridge. Stiff as a mouse among pigeons, peering through her fringe at this wrong place to be, wrong people teeming, a horse-yard of breath lit by screens, she was tugged at by every one of the three thousand, four hundred and seventy miles she was from home. She knew the distance exactly, having looked it up on her computer, confirmed it on her tablet, double-checked it with GPS, and sent the data to her phone to use against him.

The screen's radiance lured her back:

ARI: I don't get it. It's not like you.

ZEV: Don't pull my damned strings.

ARI: But what is the exact problem?

ZEV: Someone will recognise me.

ARI: Dress different. They won't expect undergrads.

ZEV: Now you're saying I'm ordinary.

She quickly rebooted the phone in case messages had jammed between countries. The screen died and shone again, but nothing new arrived.

She returned to her message history:

ARI: Calculate how much risk this is.

ZEV: That's what I'm saying, duh.

ARI: I mean the risk is all mine. An undergrad with a faculty member has no problem. A professor with an undergrad

has a problem.

ZEV: Uh-huh, you're the adult and I'm the child.

ARI: Zeva. Let's do this, come on - but elegantly.

The platform jangled. Three minutes to hope the train had broken down. If only he would call, send a message, she would leap aboard before it even stopped. But the list of bad omens inflated fast. She clung to only one of them – that she should have worn a hoodie. A hoodie isn't a garment but a cabin that you wear. And this meatspace was no place to be exposed. She ducked under echoes and hunched into her coat. Usually she wore earphones; now they were too scary, her favourite tunes were as taunting as lullabies played to a murder. All because something was wrong.

ZEV: It's mid semester. I don't even have a passport. And you give Intro to Algorithms the week you say we're in Europe. It's crazy.

ARI: One of our tickets is paid. Let's not waste it. The conference is easy, you be a tourist in the day, and we meet at night. Then later – us alone. More freedom than here.

ZEV: Here will be taking multiple-choice to decide if I went as your student, assistant or sex slave. And what do I tell my folks?

ARI: That you're twenty-three.

ZEV: Bye, Pa, dirty week in Europe with the associate professor. My grades need it.

ARI: If you mean am I serious, I am serious. I want to be with you.

She pictured him, brooding falcon of a man under the hood of his duffel coat. They were a couple of the future, of the mind alone, untethered to cumbersome flesh. After meeting in an online tutorial, the page of her life had merged with his.

Ariel Panek. Wunderkind. Sophomore magnet. Barely thirty.

He had something. Vision. Correct thinking given that the entire human race would fit into a grape if you sucked the space out of its atoms. It fell to them to aim for that shimmer and run there. It was a pact. The future. And she did head that way, spontaneously, unquestioningly. They had found each other headed there.

Together into post-human times.

Two minutes to hope the train was derailed. She glanced up the platform. Mist iced the distance into smoke. Wires and tracks cut skate marks to infinity.

ZEV: Isn't it just tacky? Like the manager and his cashier at some motel?

ARI: It's an adventure.

ZEV: Two adventures. It's one adventure if we travel together.

ARI: We fly back together. The Cloud Servers team and some of the AI lab will be at the conference. I got a later flight, I think alone, but we still can't risk the airport together, delegates will be everywhere. Later the world can be ours.

ZEV: Yours maybe, you're the European. I never went further than Chicago and that was stressful as hell.

ARI: I want to give you the world. Want you to eat it. Watch it function. Human systems, remember it's also research.

And your room in Brussels can be at the airport, the train is right there. I'll meet you next night at the station in Amsterdam.

ZEV: And if the flights get messed up? Or the train? Or if I don't find you?

ARI: Come on - in the new world? How many ways do we have to be in touch? Seven? Eight? I'll let you know the second I land, or you don't have to get on the train. And to find me is easy - the one in the hood.

Ariel understood the hoodie. They had it in common. His almost never came down, even indoors, even in summer. He knew that earphones made it a bedroom and the passing world a movie. With shades it was a party where the only guest was you. And it wasn't just taste. He had an ethic. The hoodie wasn't fashion but a way forward in our time. Whatever made outside more virtual made inside more real; and for him the real was under his hood in his head, running clean.

She loved this. Believed in it. Clean running.

One minute to pray the train had hit a cow. She cuddled the screen to her chest, cocking from side to side to keep her breath from frosting it.

ARI: This is one hard honeymoon to sell.

ZEV: Honeymoon? You skipped Vegas.

ARI: You know what I mean. Why are you so hard to convince?

ZEV: Why are you so determined to convince me?

A man approached Zeva and spoke in a rasping language. She flinched and moved to a lonely space at the end of the platform. Suddenly she was the foreign one, too shiny with her coat, her brooch, her matching luggage. She was a beacon that flashed *America*, that hollered *Jacqueline Kennedy lost her hat*. Zeva was a girl who hid at parties if she went at all. Now she was a cake in a window. In clothes she didn't like or understand, waiting to know if someone who couldn't match socks was going to show.

Her fatal flaw: romance. No scale of algorithm could fix it.

Unlike the dead whose bodies get lighter when they're gone, her screen grew heavier the more she stared at it. With adrenalin and pain. With messages from all the Zevas before this one. The young dumb one.

She wiped a sleeve across her face. Glanced up at the clock. It was nine fifty-two. Departure time. If she boarded she would have to blame her tears on the chill. Anyway, her features were of a dewy type, already shiny at the edges, red-nosed in the cold.

Loudspeakers boomed: 'Amsterdam.' Headlights gleamed down the line.

A breeze flew up. Tracks began to hum. Her message timeline reached yesterday:

ARI: Wait until Amsterdam. First night in a suite. I want you to feel like Princess Leia. A butler can take our picture.

ZEV: Butler? Should've packed a tennis skirt. Listen, buddy, you better be at that station. It's an old war movie already. Seriously promise me.

ARI: I promise. Don't worry. I'm a few hours behind you.

She clung to that message. Kept it open on her screen.

After all, they were in a pact. Only they would be standing at the end of the story. The new world wasn't fashion, it was survival. Clean algorithms were its alchemy.

Ariel Panek was her code. The algorithmist.

The train slid past like a burrowing worm, growling, hissing, peeing fluids, making sounds of unstoppable mass, to her those forces had their sounds.

She clasped her stomach as it clanked to a stop.