

RICHARD BRAUTIGAN

with an introduction by

JARVIS COCKER

Sombrero
Fallout

the
cano



Also by Richard Brautigan

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In Watermelon Sugar (1968)
The Abortion: An Historical Romance 1966 (1971)
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June 30, June 30 (1978)

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RICHARD
BRAUTIGAN

Sombrero
Fallout

A Japanese Novel

Introduction by
Jarvis Cocker



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This novel is for Junichirō Tanizaki, who wrote *The Key* and *Diary of a Mad Old Man*

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INTRODUCTION

by Jarvis Cocker

I go to the 'B' section whenever I'm in a bookshop, compulsively scanning the shelves murmuring 'Bradbury . . . Brontë . . . Burroughs . . .' I am, of course, looking for the name 'Richard Brautigan'. I seldom find it. It's a nervous habit that dates back to the time when all his writing was out of print and the only places to find his novels and poetry were second-hand booksellers and charity shops. A battered Picador edition of one of his works was a real find and a cause for celebration in the shared house I was living in at the time. My friend Steve had brought a Brautigan book home and started the fixation – it was *The Abortion: An Historical Romance 1966* and we all waited patiently for our turn to read it. After that we were hooked.

I had heard of Brautigan before but had him filed under 'hippy writer' in my long list of unfounded prejudices. The blurbs on the book jackets didn't help: the one for *The Hawkline Monster: A Gothic Western* (my second Brautigan, a hardback, ex-library copy discovered at a jumble sale in Camberwell) reads 'Magic Child, a fifteen-year-old Indian girl, wanders into the wrong whorehouse looking for the right men to kill the monster that lives in the ice caves under the basement of Miss Hawkline's yellow house.' It sounded 'wacky' or 'zany' – something that dope-smoking students would be into, okay for the sixties when everyone was high but unacceptable in the grim eighties of Thatcher's Britain. I was very wrong. The beauty of Brautigan's writing is its dryness – the way absurd or fantastical events are described in a completely deadpan manner. The subject matter might be a little *unusual* but it is always presented very precisely and economically. He's the sixties' Hemingway.

The day *Sombrero Fallout* entered my life still shines in my memory. I found it along with a copy of *Dreaming of Babylon* in a Sue Ryder shop just off Sloane Square – halcyon days. We were now in the early nineties. I had found out a little more about Brautigan in the interim: how his star had waned in the seventies and that he'd ended up killing himself in 1984 when no one was buying his books anymore. *Sombrero Fallout* was from his 'later period' – when things were starting to get a bit chilly. You can sense that from the book: a writer is trying to get a story started but becomes obsessed with searching his apartment for one of his Japanese ex-lover's hairs instead. The aborted story is thrown in the bin, where it writes itself whilst the writer works himself up into a jealous rage over whom his ex-girlfriend might be sleeping with. The bits we have been shown read like self-parody, but left to its own devices the abandoned story develops into an action-packed blockbuster. 'Look,' Brautigan seems to be saying, 'the writing gets on better without my interference.'

Meanwhile, the imagination that seems to have deserted him – as far as his writing is concerned – proceeds to torture him with images of his ex-lover's supposed infidelities. (She is, in fact, sleeping alone at home with her cat.) *Sombrero Fallout* is about an imagination in crisis. It is a 'what am I doing with my life?' book. It is full of doubt and self-loathing – and it is also incredibly funny. Yes, I am talking about that dread phrase *laugh-out-loud funny*. Brautigan describes himself as a 'humourist

without a sense of humour' but somehow the fact that he's not laughing at his own jokes just makes them funnier for us. I don't want to spoil your impending enjoyment by quoting examples but look out for the stuff about the ghost – it's a killer.

When I was invited on BBC Radio 4's *Desert Island Discs* in 2005, I chose *Sombrero Fallout* as the only book I was allowed to take along with me (the Bible and the complete works of Shakespeare are provided as standard). A 187-page novel with very short chapters and lots of blank spaces, which can be read in a single sitting, may seem a strange choice, but I would probably stick with my decision if asked again today. It is Brautigan's best book – precisely because of the way it allows glimpses of the writer in all his doubt and anxiety and then mixes them with moments of high comedy. It is simultaneously his silliest and most profound piece of work.

I imagine that the worst thing about being on a desert island is thinking about everything you're missing out on, the whole world continuing without you. *Sombrero Fallout* – a treatise on the pitfalls of the imagination, on the ridiculous situations you can sometimes think yourself into – might be a very useful antidote to have around in your hour of need. To remind you that it's all in your head: the good and the bad.

And, most of all, to remind you to laugh.

SOMBRERO

'A Sombrero fell out of the sky and landed on the Main Street of town in front of the mayor, his cousin and a person out of work. The day was scrubbed clean by the desert air. The sky was blue. It was the blue of human eyes, waiting for something to happen. There was no reason for a sombrero to fall out of the sky. No airplane or helicopter was passing overhead and it was not a religious holiday.

The first tear formed itself in his right eye. That was the eye that always started crying first. Then the left followed. He would have found it interesting if he had known that the right eye started crying first. The left eye started crying so close after the right eye that he didn't know which eye started crying first, but it was always the right one.

He was very perceptive but he wasn't perceptive enough to know which eye started crying first. That is, if one can use such a small piece of information as any kind of definition of perception.

'Is that a sombrero?' the mayor said. Mayors always speak first, especially if it is impossible for them to rise to any other political position than mayor of a small town.

'Yes,' said his cousin, who wanted to be mayor himself.

The man who had no job said nothing. He waited to see which way the wind was blowing. He didn't want to rock the boat. Being out of work in America is no laughing matter.

'It fell from the sky,' said the mayor, looking up into the absolutely clear blue sky.

'Yes,' said his cousin.

The man who had no job said nothing because he wanted a job. He did not want to jeopardize whatever faint possibility he had of getting one. It was better for everybody if the big shots did all the talking.

The three men looked around for a reason for a sombrero to fall out of the sky but they couldn't find one, including the man who had no job.

The sombrero looked brand-new.

It was lying in the street with its crown pointed toward the sky.

Size: 7¼.

'Why are hats falling from the sky?' said the mayor.

'I don't know,' said his cousin.

The man who was without a job wondered if the hat would fit his head.

Now both eyes were crying.

Oh, God . . .

He reached into the typewriter as if he were an undertaker zipping up the fly of a dead man in his coffin and removed a piece of paper with everything that has been written here except for his crying, which he didn't know he was doing because he had done it so often recently that it was like drinking glass of water that you drink accidentally when you are not thirsty and do not remember it afterwards.

He tore up the piece of paper that had everything that you have read here about the sombrero. He

tore it up very carefully into many pieces and threw them on the floor.

~~He would start over again the next morning writing about something else that would have nothing do with a sombrero falling out of the sky.~~

His business was writing books. He was a very well-known American humorist. It was difficult to find a bookstore that did not carry at least one of his titles.

Why was he crying, then?

Isn't fame enough?

The answer is quite simple.

His Japanese girlfriend was gone.

She had left him.

That was the reason for tears that started in eyes that he could no longer remember except for their crying which was now an everyday occurrence since the Japanese woman had left him.

Some days he cried so much that he thought that he was dreaming.

JAPANESE

As Yukiko slept, her hair slept long and Japanese about her. She didn't know that her hair was sleeping. Protein needs its rest, too. She did not think like that. Her thoughts were basically very simple.

She combed her hair in the morning.

It was the first thing that she did when she woke up. She always combed it very carefully.

Sometimes she would put it in a bun on top of her head in the classic Japanese manner. Sometimes she would let it hang long, reaching to her ass.

It was a little after ten in the evening in San Francisco. Drops of Pacific rain fell against the window beside her bed, but she didn't hear them because she was sound asleep. She always slept very well and sometimes she would sleep for long periods of time: twelve hours or so, enjoying it as if she were actually doing something like going for a walk or cooking a good meal. She also liked to eat.

As he tore up the sheet of paper with words on it about a sombrero falling from the sky, she slept and her hair slept with her: long and dark next to her.

Her hair dreamt about being very carefully combed in the morning.

GHOST

He looked at the pieces of paper on the floor about a sombrero falling out of the sky for no apparent reason and somehow the sight of them increased his crying.

Who was she sleeping with? he thought, as his eyes raced with tears trying to get out, rushing all at once in front of one another, competing to get down his cheeks as if they were in an Olympiad of Crying with visions of gold medals in front of them.

He imagined her in bed with another man. The man he thought up to be her lover had no definite body or color of hair or even features. Her imaginary lover did not have bones, flesh or blood. The man he had placed in bed with her was just a ghost-like energy force with a penis.

He probably, if it's possible, would have cried even more if he had known she was sleeping alone. That would have made him feel even sadder.

SAILOR

What was he going to do with the rest of the night? It was 10:15 in November. He didn't want to watch the eleven o'clock news. He wasn't hungry. He didn't want a drink. He knew if he tried to read a book the pages would swim through the tears in his eyes.

So he thought about her fucking somebody else. He thought about another man, a nameless face with his penis entering her. He thought about her moaning and moving under the weight of another man's cock. Thoughts like that were no good for him but he clung to them like a drowning sailor to a board in the middle of an ocean without horizons.

Then he looked down at the pieces of paper at his feet. Why should a sombrero fall out of the sky? The torn pieces of paper would never be able to tell him. He sat down on the floor in the middle of them.

ERASER

The Japanese woman slept on.

Yukiko had gone to bed very tired. It had been a hard day for her. All she wanted to do at work was to go home and go to sleep, and now here she was: she was home sleeping.

She had a small dream about her childhood. It was a dream that she would not remember when she woke up in the morning nor would she ever remember it.

It was gone forever.

It was actually gone as she dreamt it.

It erased itself as it happened.

BREATHING

The first time he met her he was very drunk one night in San Francisco. She had gotten off work and had gone to a bar with some co-workers. She didn't like to drink because typically Japanese she couldn't hold her liquor and besides that, she didn't really like the feeling of alcohol in her body. It made her feel dizzy.

So she didn't go to bars very often.

After she finished work that night she was tired but her two co-workers persuaded her to go with them to a local bar where young people hung out.

When he turned around on his bar stool, very drunk, which was a condition not unknown to him, and saw her sitting there in her uniform, little did he know that two years later he would be sitting on the floor surrounded by little pieces of paper dealing with a sombrero falling out of the sky, his eyes dashing tears forth like a spring creek in the mountains and he would have nowhere to go forever and his life would be tired of breathing him.

SUBURB

Yukiko rolled over.

That plain, that simple.

Her body was small in its moving.

And her hair followed, dreaming her as she moved.

A cat, her cat, in bed with her was awakened by her moving, and watched her turn slowly over in bed. When she stopped moving, the cat went back to sleep.

It was a black cat and could have been a suburb of her hair.

ORIGAMI

He picked up the many torn pieces of paper about the sombrero and dropped them into an empty waste-paper basket which was dark and totally bottomless, but the pieces of white paper miraculously found a bottom and lay upon it glowing faintly upward like a reverse origami cradled on the abyss.

He did not know that she slept alone.

GIRL

There had to be a way out of this.

Then he knew what to do. He called a girl on the telephone. She was pleased that it was him when she answered the telephone. 'I'm glad you called,' she said. 'Why don't you come over and have a nightcap with me? I'd like to see you.'

She only lived four blocks away.

There was the sound of romance in her voice.

For years they had been on and off casual lovers and she was very good in bed. She had read all of his books and was very intelligent because she never talked to him about them. He didn't like to talk about his books and she had never asked him anything about them, but they were all there on her bookshelf. He liked the idea of her having all of his books but he liked even better the fact that they had been lovers for five years now and she had never asked him about them. He wrote them, she read them, and they did some pretty fair fucking together.

She wasn't his physical type but she compensated for it in other ways.

'I'd like to see you,' she said on the telephone.

'I'll be over in a few minutes,' he said.

'I'll put a log on the fire,' she said.

He was feeling better now.

Maybe it would all work out.

Perhaps, it wasn't hopeless.

He put his coat on and started out the door.

Actually, he did nothing because he had been only thinking about all of this in his mind. None of it was real. He hadn't touched the telephone and there was no such girl.

He was still staring at the torn pieces of paper in the waste-paper basket. He was staring very intently at them as they made friends with the abyss. They seemed to have a life of their own. It was a big decision but they decided to go on without him.

MAYOR

‘Why are hats falling from the sky?’ said the mayor.

‘I don’t know,’ said his cousin.

The man who was without a job wondered if the hat would fit his head.

‘This is serious,’ said the mayor. ‘Let me take a look at that sombrero.’ He gestured toward the hat and his cousin immediately reached to pick it up because he wanted to be mayor himself someday and picking up that hat might get him some political help in the future when his name would be on the ballot.

The mayor might even endorse him and say at a big rally, ‘I’ve been a good mayor and you’ve re-elected me six times but I know my cousin here will be a great mayor and carry on a tradition of honesty and leadership in our community.’

Yes, it was a very good idea to pick up the sombrero.

His future as mayor depended on it.

He would have been an idiot if he’d said, ‘Pick it up yourself. Who do you think you are, anyway?’ wasn’t put on this earth to pick up sombreros for you.’

BERRIES

Though it was a hot day, the sombrero was ice-cold. When the cousin touched the hat, he withdrew his hand immediately as if he had touched electricity.

‘What’s wrong?’ said the mayor.

‘This sombrero is cold,’ his cousin said.

‘What?’ the mayor said.

‘It’s cold.’

‘Cold?’

‘Ice-cold.’

The man who did not have a job stared at the sombrero. It didn’t look cold to him. But what did he know? He didn’t have a job. Perhaps if he had a job the sombrero would have looked cold to him. Maybe that’s why he didn’t have a job. He couldn’t see a cold sombrero when he was looking at one.

His unemployment benefits had run out a month before and he was now reduced to eating berries that he found growing in the nearby foothills.

He was very tired of eating berries.

He wanted a hamburger.

HAMBURGERS

An idea took immediate form in the unemployed man's mind. The sombrero was still lying in the street. The mayor's cousin had failed to pick it up. He had jumped back as if he'd been stung by a bee when he tried to pick it up.

The sombrero lay there.

Perhaps if the unemployed man picked up the sombrero and handed it to the mayor, the mayor would give him a job and he could stop eating berries and eat a lot of hamburgers instead.

He looked again at the sombrero lying in the street and his mouth started watering at the imagined taste of hamburgers with lots of onions and catsup on them.

He would not let this chance go by.

He might never be employed again if he did not pick up that sombrero and hand it to the mayor.

What was he going to do when the berry season was over?

What a terrible thought.

No more berries.

Even though he hated berries now, they were better to eat than nothing. What was he going to do when they were gone?

This sombrero lying in the street might be his last chance.

CAREER

'I'll get the sombrero for you, mayor,' he said and bent over to pick up the sombrero.

'No, I'll get it,' the mayor's cousin said, suddenly realizing that if he didn't pick up that sombrero he might never be mayor.

Who was this unemployed bastard who was trying to pick up the sombrero and ruin his bid for public office? Did he want to become mayor himself? Even if the sombrero was frighteningly cold, he wasn't going to let this son-of-a-bitch pick it up and become mayor of the town.

Why didn't I just pick it up in the first place? the cousin thought. Then none of this would be happening. An ice-cold sombrero can't hurt you. It just surprised him. That was all. He didn't expect to be cold, so he had jumped back. Who would have thought that the sombrero would be frozen? Anyone would have been surprised and reacted the way he did.

Suddenly the cousin hated the sombrero for having made a fool out of him. He had to hand that sombrero to the mayor if he ever wanted to be mayor himself. His whole political career would end right then and there if he didn't get the sombrero to the mayor.

God-damn sombrero!

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