



Off Season

Daniel Simon

Off Season

www.off-season.co.uk
ISBN 978-1-78972-213-0

9 781789 722130 >

Off Season

Daniel Simon

Contents

1. The Invisible Girl	5
2. The Rebel	21
3. Last Night Stand	35
4. The Power of Love	47
5. A Dinner Party	59
6. The Good Old Days	71



1. The Invisible Girl

By the time Lorna discovered that she could make herself invisible, the worst of the damage was already done. In fact, she often thought that without those nighttime visits and all the secrets and the guilt, she might never have discovered that she had a superpower at all. Small mercies. The ritual for being invisible to predatory males was more complex than your common or garden style invisibility. And frankly more disgusting. It involved faeces and urine and certain magic words that had to be screamed rather than muttered. And it didn't make her completely invisible, like the normal magic. But she got left alone, and that was what mattered.

Not that the other invisibility, the normal invisibility if you could call it that, was 100% effective. Some people could still see her; mostly those either completely full of love or those completely full of hate. Lorna had no use for either. She just wanted to be left alone, really. Though at least the love people didn't want to hurt her, she supposed.

And invisibility wasn't all that either. She might be invisible, but she didn't dematerialise or anything. She still existed. People could still tread on her, trip over her. That's why she only stayed near the sea in the winter, when it wasn't too crowded. She liked the sea-side. Was always happy here as a child. Or at least less miserable. She could look at the ships on the horizon and dream about the places they were going to. At school they had learned about ships and Rotterdam and Felixstowe and Hamburg. One day perhaps she would make it that far.

But for now, she had found a great hotel to stay in; only recently shut down so it wasn't completely smashed up yet. There was a room on the top floor with a toilet where the bowl wasn't broken. No water, but she had buckets on the terrace that filled up whenever it rained.

She knew she could become visible whenever she wanted, find somewhere better to live with the help of the people at the centre. But last time she had tried that she couldn't come and go as she pleased. She hated people telling her what she could and couldn't do. She had tried making herself invisible, but one of the ones full of love had stopped her as she was screaming the magic words and she had ended up in a hospital. They gave her pills that made her calm. But the pills stopped her from becoming invisible and she could not carry on with her photography.

Lorna was a photographer. And a damn good one, if she did say so herself. She had used a camera originally, but it got stolen. She had stolen another one, but that had gotten stolen too. Couldn't trust anyone, ha ha. So now she was a mental photographer. Which was better anyway. There had been someone once, somewhere, she didn't remember where, who had told her that she might feel better if she had a mental picture of a happy place. So those are the pictures she takes. Here in this place where she was happy once, lots of other people come to be happy. So Lorna makes herself invisible. She dirties her face and clothes, mutters the magic words to herself on a constant loop. She can see it working. People drift past her, not seeing her. Sometimes it works extra well and a sort of forcefield develops making people walk around her, or even cross the road. She keeps saying the magic words, sometimes muttering, sometimes speaking, occasionally shouting. And she walks around the town, taking her mental photographs of happy places, of people smiling, having fun on the rides, of families where the children are laughing and not scared. That's why it's great here; why she loves the seaside.















2. The Rebel

What am I rebelling against? What have you got? Actually, that's a line from an old film that mum told me about. I haven't seen it myself. But it's true, nevertheless. Mum says we are rebelling against The Established Order, and by not going off to uni I am rebelling against Middle Class Expectations. We don't have a class, mum and I. There's no point in uni anyway - it's all just to get a job in an office supporting The Established Order. And we already live in one of the best parts of Britain so there's no point in moving a long way away from mum to live somewhere that's much worse, is there? Seriously, the house prices round here are among the highest in the country, and for a lot of people it's just second homes, whereas we get to live here all the year round. And anyway, mum says she needs me and it's always nice to be needed! And uni is just an in-between thing. In between childhood and adulthood. And I was raised to believe that childhood and adulthood are not two separate things. I am not in between anything.

True, there's not much to do in the winter here, but we think that's for the best - a field left to fallow grows the best crops. That's a farming metaphor. It means that we make our own entertainment. Because we have to. At least I do - mum already has a track record of Being Artistic, so she just needs to recharge her creative batteries with Netflix and books and wine. I get to go out and explore the world.

Luke and Joanna are off at uni in London now. Their photos look like they're having a great time. Or at least they think they are. But London is terrible. The tall buildings and the pollution and the crowds of people and the crime and all that. I've not been, but mum used to live there. I'm sure Luke and Joanna will see it as it really is once all that novelty wears off. It just looks exciting and fun, that's all. I'm sure.

I started hanging out with Lily. I used to think she was just a boring weirdo at school, but she's OK actually. She hasn't gone to uni either. She says she wants to take a year off to do ministry or something. She introduced me to some of her church friends. Not the types I would normally hang out with, but they have some interesting points of view. I don't agree with them at all. Perhaps that's what makes them interesting. We have had some proper good chats. Some of them don't care too much for the Way Things Are either.

One of them, Alfie, is a really sound guy. Makes me laugh, like Joanna could. He says they have this thing called the Alpha Course that I should try. No pressure or anything, just chatting about life and stuff. There's not much else to do. The beach is mostly closed because of the weather. The fairground is shut now, not that it's all that exciting even when it isn't. Everything is still bright and lit up and looks like fun, but there's no substance. Alfie reckons that they just use coloured lights so that junkies can't see their veins to inject their drugs. Some of the guys with cars go down to the covered car park and play music and drink and all that, but that doesn't appeal to me much. Same as smuggling booze into the laundrette or the cinema or the kiddies playground. Drinking isn't all that exciting. And if I want to do it, I'll do it at home. At least mum buys decent wine.

So I said I'd go along to this Alpha Course anyway. It's at the church hall, but I'm sure it'll be cool. I'll tell mum I'm hanging out in the beach shelters like she did when she was a kid. Might even 'smuggle' a bottle of wine out to put her mind at rest. Can always hide it in the hedge and smuggle it back in later. I could just tell her, but it's not worth the hassle. She hates the church because we are Free Thinkers. Rebels. See?













3. Last Night Stand

The sex shop is damp and smells of old carpet and wet dogs. The light from the overhead tubes, flickering and pasty, bleaches everyone's faces and makes the women on the DVD covers look like police photographs of crime scenes.

"You should get one of these for the wedding night," shouts Gav waving a huge, black dildo.

The thought of using it makes Billy feel slightly sick. "C'mon lads," he says. "We should go."

"Always the prude, eh?" Says Gav. "You'd better stock up is all I'm saying. Nowt like this back in the village!" He waves a pair of fluffy pink handcuffs in Billy's direction, though they don't look sturdy enough to hold Lisa, let alone Gav who is a strong, muscular lad.

As this is supposed to be Billy's last night of freedom (though in truth he isn't getting married for another week), he decides that he may as well go for it. He doesn't usually drink much. He jokes that he doesn't like not being in control; that you never know what's going to come out when your guard is down. Though it's not a joke, not really. But tonight, to hell with it. He necks three glasses of wine in the room before they go out and has a warm and slightly flat pint of lager in the strange and old-fashioned guest house bar downstairs.

Gav has taken charge of the evening. Billy doesn't know where they are going but Gav and the others are all in on it. Billy figures it'll be a few pints then a strip club, though how anyone could find that idea erotic god only knows.

But it turns out, Gav has an ace up his sleeve. They have a few vodka-Red Bulls in a loud, flashing bar where nobody can hear anything so nobody talks, then they cross the road to what looks like an old cinema. The paint on the woodwork is peeling and the poster by the door has slid down in the frame so that Billy can't read it.

Billy has seen nothing like it. It's a cabaret show but it's all men in drag. Although the seats, old cinema seats by the look of them, are saggy and uncomfortable, It's still amazing - incredibly well produced and the music, though loud, is much more up Billy's street; a mixture of oldies which he loves and pop music which is less his thing but a lot better than the crap that was playing in the bar they just left. During the interval he leans across to Gav. "Why d'you choose this place?"

"I checked online - this is the new thing apparently. Metrosexuals and shit. And you don't seem like the strip club type to be quite frank with you buddy." He smiles and winks.

After the show, they all go to a place called The Flamingo which is right next door. "This is definitely a gay club isn't it?" Asks Billy. He has another vodka-Red Bull in his hand and everything is getting a bit blurry.

"It's the in thing," says Gav, clapping him on the shoulder.

Some time and some drinks later, Billy isn't sure how many, Gav comes over to where he is talking to some guys he just met. "I'm off back to the hotel now Billy mate," he says, his shouted breath tickling Billy's ear. "You stay here. Have a good time. It's your last night of freedom!"

Billy nods. He's not quite sure what is happening. That is what he tells himself.

Gav leans in even closer. "Don't worry Billy, mate. What happens at the seaside, stays at the seaside."

The next morning, Billy has no idea how he makes it to the station. He has to stop twice to throw up. He stands at the barrier waiting for the lads. He feels wretched and sick and has a warm lump of something deep in his belly. Time to go home, he says to himself as he waits by the barrier. He looks out at the steel rails disappearing far into the distance. Across the road he can see the doors of The Flamingo locked tight.





**INSIDE
SHOP**

**ADULT
TOYS**

AMIGO'S

YOUR LOCAL CONVENIENCE STORE

CIGARETTE
SHOP
OPEN

cash



cashzone

TOBACCO
SLURP
SANDWICHES
SOFT DRINKS
FANCY DRESS
HATS / WIGS
SWEETS
MOBILE PHONE
ACCESSORIES
PHONE CHARGING
AVAILABLE HERE



GROceries
COLD DRINKS
TOBACCO
TOILETRIES

OPEN
welcome



M&M'S
TWIX
MilkyWay



NESCAFÉ
£1.49



4. A Dinner Party

The whole place is empty. Even after so long, I find it strange that the whole town stops for the winter. For half of the year! I found a lot strange at first. We don't really have seaside towns like this back in the Netherlands. But most of it makes sense now. The beer for breakfast. They tell me that it is only a holiday thing. The donkeys on the beach. The crazy joke shops and silly t-shirts and buckets and spades and the deck chairs and even eating rock. But I don't understand how the whole town is empty in the winter. All the places are designed for people. For queues and crowds and for families to eat and sleep. The cafes are empty. The beaches are empty. The arcades and the fairgrounds and the shops and the parks and the car parks are empty. And, yes, the hotels are empty too. The hotel back at home, we were never empty for six months. I keep it open here though. Because sometimes there are people. Not many, not like the summer. But there are people who come for conferences and stag nights and things like that.

And what else can I do? The town might close down for the winter but I am a person. I cannot close down for the winter, can I? I say that like it is a joke, but it is not funny.

This weekend there is no conference and there is no stag party. I keep the 'vacancies' sign lit because we are near the station and you never know, to be honest.

Instead, I will have a dinner party. It is good practice and I can give the food to the homeless place down the road and they are happy of it. And it is good to be busy. It stops me going crazy.

Mrs. Felton from room 3 is the first to arrive. She visited with her husband for a week in 2003 and never stopped complaining. Her husband I don't remember. But I remember her all right. She complained that there were no tongs to take the toast from the toast rack. She complained that both the pillows were of the same consistency. Of course they bloody are. I tell her this as soon as she sits down, gathering her old fur coat across her chest. "Of course the pillows are the same consistency you stupid woman!" I say. "They came from the same shop!"

I seat Mrs. Felton next to Richard Marshall from room 16. In 2014, Richard ran away without paying and left the room in a terrible state. The curtains were torn down and there was blood in the toilet and on the bathroom floor. The room smelled really bad. It was the small single room at the top of the house - there was only really space for him, so I don't think it could have been anyone else's blood, to be honest. He left very early in the morning. I went to the police as you do. I had an address on the booking form. But by the time they had heard back from his landlady, Richard Marshall was dead. They didn't say what happened, just that he was dead. It was very sad, and I tell him as he sits down that I am sorry that he had to live his life that way. He is mostly there to punish Mrs. Felton though as he still smells really bad.

At the good table by the window, I seat the Heaton hen party that stayed in August of 1996. I was younger then and they were lovely girls. They were flirty and funny and full of life, particularly Jennie Mostyn from room 12, who was the best friend of the lady getting married. I was too young though and my English wasn't brilliant to be honest, so I couldn't keep up with the flirting. They were very sweet though, and very pretty. I told them I was from Amsterdam as that is the only Dutch place that the English know. I used to tell people where I was really from and try to explain it, but then I realised that they were not really interested. So now I just say Amsterdam. I say a special hello to Jennie who smiles at me warmly. "Would you take a picture of us please Tom?" she asks me, and pulls a phone from her bag.

Damnation.

1996 - there were not many mobile phones. And none like this Apple phone, with the camera. The whole group disappear with a pouff! And a cloud of smoke. Very theatrical. But now I am left with empty chairs at a table laid with food. I turn, and Mrs. Felton and Richard Marshall have both gone also.

The place is empty.

I sigh, and begin to gather the food from the tables and wonder what time the homeless place closes.











5. The Power of Love

“Sea view, twin beds, with breakfast,” says the receptionist checking his computer.

“I’m a restless sleeper,” David explains.

“He didn’t ask,” says Sally.

The receptionist hands them their keys.

David thinks it would be a good idea to go to all the places they went on their Honeymoon. “It’s a magical place,” he says again. “It always has been. Don’t matter what’s going on in the rest of the world, coming to the seaside is like a bubble.”

The pub in which they had their first drink as a married couple has gone. Instead, there are boards up all around the site so they can’t see anything but the tops of a crane and a huge pile of rubble.

“Symbolic,” said Sally.

David shrugs. “Regeneration,” he says. “Building something new and better.”

There is a brief argument over where they went next all those years before. When they finally agree, and walk there down wind-blown, litter-strewn streets, David is hugely relieved to see the pub is still there, and open. Even better, it hasn’t changed much inside. He goes over to look at the jukebox, hoping to put on *The Power of Love* by Jennifer Rush, their song, but it isn’t on there. He buys their drinks and takes them over to the corner they sat in before.

“What’s this?” asks Sally, even though she can see what it is.

“Your drink,” says David.

Sally rolls her eyes. “I’d rather have had a white wine,” she says.

“But you always have a half of lager,” says David.

“Never mind,” says Sally. “I’ll drink it.”

He buys her a glass of wine on the next round. She doesn’t look like she enjoys it much, but she doesn’t say anything.

“Let’s try something else,” says David as they leave the pub. “Let’s do seaside stuff. The stuff that nobody ever does anywhere else.”

Sally shrugs again. “OK,” she says.

So they buy rock and eat hot dogs and donuts. They have a go on the 2p pusher machines and both in turn fail to hook a teddy bear with a robot claw. They have a few drinks at the family fun pub on the pier and watch donkeys totter up and down the beach below. David looks at the donkeys, is about to say something and looks down at his own portly gut. “Perhaps not,” he says and catches Sally in a smile. They write their names in the sand. David considers drawing a heart around them, but doesn’t want to push things too far. They find a hall of mirrors and David sees Sally smile again. They even go into one of the gypsy fortune teller booths. The lady there tells them with a bored, northern voice that vibrates with smoker’s phlegm that they will have a long and happy life.

“See,” says David. “I told you.”

“She didn’t say we’d have a long and happy life together, did she?” says Sally. But she seems to be smiling again.

On the way back to the guesthouse, they pass a pub - it is a modern building, all glass and steel and posters for drinks offers. It certainly wasn’t there on David and Sally’s honeymoon, and David isn’t sure what it has replaced. An empty bomb lot probably. But he hears the familiar strains of Jennifer Rush from inside and grabs Sally by the hand, pulling her through the doors.

That night, before bed, David is drunk. So is Sally, he thinks. He is tempted to kiss her. Her eyes are shining. Probably the booze, but it reminds him of how she used to be. “See,” he says. “A magic place.”

Sally smiles. “Yes,” she says. “You’re right.”

“And we’ve got a whole ‘nother week too,” he says. “Till we have to go home”

Sally’s smile slowly fades. “Yes,” she says. “One whole week.”











6. The Good Old Days

“Betty here is our oldest resident, aren’t you Betty love?” says Barry the nurse steering an eager-eyed young woman with a sensible coat and ridiculous shoes across the common room towards her.

Oh Lord, thinks Betty. Here we go. She plasters on a faltering smile, wonders if she should let her hands shake or if that would be putting it on too much.

“This is Alexandra, Betty,” says Barry. “She’s a reporter from the nationals. Come to talk about the good old days.”

Ever since this whole Brexit thing, all anyone wants to talk about is how it used to be. Will the good old days be making a comeback? Jesus, she hopes not. Perhaps she should tell this one the truth. Unvarnished as it were.

“Hello Mrs. Hill,” says the reporter, speaking slowly like Betty was 5 and not 85.

Over the next few minutes, they dance the familiar dance. Betty talks about how she used to visit this place from the city and had such good memories that when it was time to retire, there was nowhere else she wanted to go. Partly true, at least. She certainly has memories. Look at you, golden girl, she wants to say. I was like you. More beautiful. Smarter. I’d have kicked your head in back then. Kicked your head in and run off with your fella. Or your girl, all the same to me.

“So what is your favourite memory, Mrs. Hill?” Asks the girl.

Betty gazes into the distance for a while, allowing a slight smile to cross her mouth. When she answers, she lets a slight waver edge into her voice. The reporter is lapping it up. “I danced with Dickie Scott once,” she says. “He was a lovely lad. I thought he was going to make it as big as Elvis but it never happened. Sad really.”

Though Dickie had certainly been big enough for her.

“It was in the Starlight Lounge. Where that Aldi is now. He was playing there for the summer season. Dickie Scott and the Tearaways.”

“Ah,” says the girl. “Such simple times!”

Yeah, thinks Betty. So simple. Dickie was a real bad boy, not like your TV and internet stars with their perfect hair and designer tattoos. The reason Dickie didn't make it was a ten year stretch in Strangeways for killing a kid in a fight. Though he was already past it then, she supposes. The drink and drugs had already taken their payment.

But that night, that night all that was still in the future. That night was magical. A clear, summer evening, warm enough to go for a walk in the dunes. They'd met this little French cutie fresh from the boat at Dover. Looked so sweet and innocent, but the three of them got loaded and shared each other till it got too cold and they had to get dressed again. That was why she loved the seaside. Anything goes. Usual rules never applied here. Even back then, it mattered less what colour you were, what language you spoke or who you chose to go to bed with. Not like the rest of the country.

"And do you think Brexit will see a return to the good old days?" asks the reporter.

Suddenly Betty feels every one of her 85 years. So damn tired. Look at you, she wants to shout. With your clear eyes and pert breasts and perfect teeth You think us oldies are a different species, here in our old people's zoo. You'll be my age in a heartbeat. One minute you're shagging a bad boy in the back of a camper van and before you know it you're pissing your pants because you can't make it to the toilet in time. And have you looked round town recently? Have you seen what it's really like out there? It's a town of the dead. A town of zombies. Memorial benches outnumber the people. The people who won't even sit on the damn things. They're gravestones, not benches. Motorised wheelchairs outnumber cars. The nearly dead outnumber the newly born five to one. Ten to one. Everyone who lives here is either too young or too old to escape. The good old days, which weren't all that good anyway, are long dead. Same as this whole damned town.

Betty takes a deep breath. She smiles again. "I really don't know, dear," she says. "And I'll be dead before too long, so it makes fuck all difference to me".









