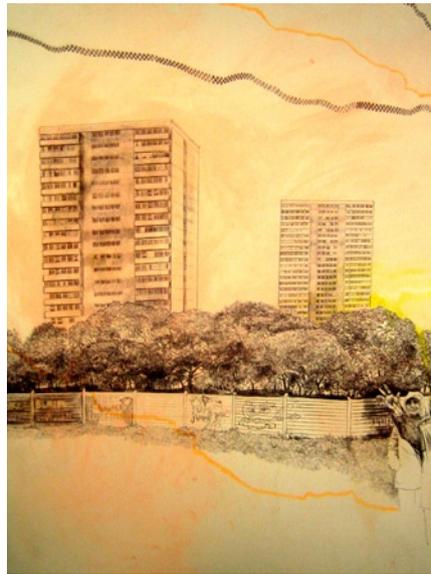


# Five Dials



## NUMBER 2

- RICHARD REYNOLDS 4 *We Do Not Use the Word Lightly*  
ALISON MACLEOD 5 *Brighton Rock*  
JAY GRIFFITHS 8 *Ancient Trees, Ancient Knowledge*  
ROBERT MACFARLANE 9 *The Latter-Day Thoreau*  
ROGER DEAKIN 11 *On Roydon Fen*  
ARTHUR BRADFORD 13 *Travels with Paul*  
BENJAMIN MARKOVITS 16 *Two poems*  
RAYMOND CHANDLER 18 *Letters to Jamie*



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VLADIMIR TCHERNAVIN trekked through marshes to escape to Finland from Stalin's Gulag.

*Five Dials* is brought to you with the help of MATT CLACHER, DEBBIE HATFIELD, ANNA KELLY, NICK LOWNDES, JULIETTE MITCHELL, JAMES CHANT, and SIMON PROSSER.

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# Travels with Paul

by Arthur Bradford

I HAD BEEN FIRED from my job for a stupid indiscretion and needed to leave town. I packed up my belongings quickly and caught a ride with an acquaintance who was headed out west. I say ‘acquaintance’ because I’d only met him once before. He was an Irish fellow named Paul O’Malley and he was the cousin of a woman I used to date, or maybe they were lovers, I never really knew. She had introduced him to me one night in a bar by saying, ‘This is my cousin Paul,’ but things were rarely straight-up between me and that woman.

Anyway, the point is that Paul had been passing through town on his way to the west coast, and that night in the bar he announced that he would be gone in the morning. I saw him two weeks later though, right after I’d been fired from that job I told you about. He was wandering downtown, looking a little dazed and strung out.

‘I haven’t slept in three days,’ he told me.

‘I thought you were going west,’ I said. ‘I am.’

‘But you said you were leaving two weeks ago.’

‘I got hung up. Wait, two weeks? It hasn’t been that long.’

‘Yes it has.’

‘Oh.’ Paul scratched his head. His hair was thinning at the top. He was a skinny guy with a long neck and an enormous Adam’s apple, which bobbed up and down as he spoke. He needed a shave too, or maybe he was growing a beard. The stubble was at that awkward, scruffy half-way point.

‘I got fired from my job,’ I told Paul. ‘I’d like to leave town.’

‘You want to ride with me? I’ll leave tomorrow.’

This idea seemed to perk Paul up. He clapped his hands together and rubbed his fuzzy chin.

‘Sure, yeah, okay,’ I said.

‘We’ll leave in the morning.’

‘Great, fine.’

We left two days later. Paul picked me

up at my place, still looking tired and rundown.

‘I can’t sleep,’ he said. ‘I can’t even shut my eyes.’

‘What’s wrong with you?’ I asked him.

‘Nothing. Insomnia. I’m fine.’

‘You don’t look fine.’

‘Well, I feel fine,’ he said. ‘I just can’t sleep.’

‘Listen,’ I told him, ‘I don’t want any funny business. I just need a ride out of town.’

‘Sure, right, I understand that,’ he said.

Paul’s car was a small Ford hatchback. It was already crammed full with his stuff so I had to leave several of my belongings behind. I left them at the house of a friend with the understanding that I’d return for them later. I never did.

Anyway, we hit the road and began our journey west. Paul’s car was equipped with a set of very worn out seats. The one I was sitting in, the passenger seat, had something wrong with the backrest. If I leaned back it would slope off to one side, and I’d twist around uncomfortably. I’d been hoping to get a little sleep while he drove, but I could see now that this wouldn’t be possible.

After about three hours of driving, Paul pulled off the highway and stopped in front of a pizza shop. He unbuckled his pants and pulled them down to his knees. Then he looked at me.

‘What are you doing?’ I asked him.

‘I thought maybe you’d like to give me a blowjob,’ he said.

‘No,’ I said. ‘No, I wouldn’t.’

Paul pursed his lips and nodded his head. ‘All right,’ he said, pulling his pants up in a hurry. He put the car in gear and sped back out on to the highway.

Now things were awkward between us. We drove for a few hours in silence. A heavy rain began to fall as we crossed the state line into Ohio. When the big trucks passed by water splashed against our windshield and threatened to push the little car right off the road. Paul had to jerk the steering wheel this way and that to keep us on course.

‘Are you getting tired?’ I asked Paul. ‘I can drive. I’m a good driver.’

‘That’s okay,’ said Paul. ‘I like to drive.’

But then a few minutes later he said, ‘Actually, I’m getting sick of this. Maybe you should take the wheel.’

‘Okay,’ I said.

He pulled over and we switched seats, quickly running around opposite ends of the car so as to not get too wet from the rain.

The driver’s seat was even less comfortable than the passenger seat. I felt like I was sitting in a bucket. The little hatchback was difficult to operate as well. The clutch was loose and I was never quite sure when it would kick into gear. Out on the highway the trucks cruised by and pushed us around like a rowboat on a stormy sea.

‘I hope this rain stops soon,’ I told Paul.

‘Oh, it will,’ he said.

Paul leaned back and tried to shut his eyes. Every time he did, though, he could only keep them closed for a few seconds. Then he’d pop them open and his head would snap forward.

‘What was that?’ he’d ask me.

‘Nothing,’ I’d say, ‘I’m just driving.’

‘I can’t even take a nap,’ said Paul, finally. ‘This is a big pain in the ass.’

‘Maybe you should take some sleeping pills,’ I suggested.

‘Oh, I won’t do that,’ said Paul. ‘That’s a vicious cycle. Everyone knows that.’

‘Okay,’ I said.

A while later Paul sat up and said, ‘Are you trying to kill me?’

‘No,’ I said, ‘I’m not. I was trying to help.’

Paul stared at me with his bloodshot eyes, and I could see then that if he didn’t get some sleep soon things were going to unravel.

‘I’m pulling over,’ I told Paul. ‘Maybe I should get out.’

‘What do you mean?’ he asked.

‘I think I should get out here,’ I said. ‘I’ve gone far enough.’

‘What are you talking about?’ said Paul. He rubbed his face and leaned forward in his seat. ‘You said you wanted to come west. We’re only in Ohio.’

‘I know that,’ I told him. ‘I just think you need some sleep. We both do, actually.’

‘Well, that’s fine, but don’t abandon me here. We’ve got a long ways to go. I’m

not doing this alone.'

'You were going to do it alone before,' I pointed out.

'Oh, don't pull that on me now,' said Paul. He slapped his hand against the window. The rain was letting up, at least. I thought Paul was going to cry.

We passed by a sign for a town named Zanesville and Paul said, 'Hey!'

'What?'

'I know someone in Zanesville.'

'We've already passed it.'

'No, let's stop there. She's a nice gal. She'll give us food. I haven't seen her in years. She'll be happy to see me.'

I wasn't so sure about that, but I thought this might be my chance to make a clean break, so I pulled off at the next exit and we backtracked to Zanesville. It was a muddy town situated on the bank of a river. Paul had me drive around in circles for over an hour looking for a street name with the word 'Cherry' in it.

'Cherryvale. Cherryville, something like that.'

When we found the street it was called 'Vine St.'

'Cherries grow on vines,' explained Paul. 'They're vegetables. They grow on vines.'

After some more aimless driving along this street we stopped in front of a brown cottage with a mailbox shaped like a football.

'This is Alberta's house,' said Paul. 'This is it!'

'Are you sure? How do you know?'

'I was here before,' he said, 'I spent a week and a half here. I remember this place.'

We walked up to the front door and Paul pounded upon it.

'We go way back, me and Alberta,' Paul said to me. 'We had a good thing going.'

'When was this?' I asked.

'Six years ago,' said Paul. 'Or maybe seven. She'll remember me.'

He knocked on the door again, but it appeared that no one was home. Paul leaned over a hedge and looked through the window.

'Hmmm,' he said. He tried turning the door handle but it was locked. He looked back in the window again.

'We shouldn't go in there,' I said to him.

'I know, I know.'

We sat down on the doorstep and watched the cars drive by. I had seen a

bus station back in town when we were driving around. I thought maybe I could catch a ride over there and find a bus going west.

'I think I'll head over to the bus station,' I said to Paul.

'Oh no,' he said. 'Oh no you don't. You haven't even met Alberta.'

'She's not home,' I pointed out. 'She might not come back for days.'

Paul thought about this for a moment. 'She wouldn't do that,' he said. 'She wouldn't just disappear.'

'You haven't seen her for six years,' I said. 'You have no idea what she might be up to.'

'Look,' Paul said, 'Do you trust me or not?'

I could have told him honestly that I did not. What kind of question was that? But instead I said, 'I trust you, Paul.'

We sat on the step for a while longer. Paul shut his eyes and rested his greasy head on my shoulder. I was afraid to move because I knew he needed sleep. We sat like that for perhaps twenty uncomfortable minutes and then a pick-up truck rumbled to a stop in front of the house. Two teenagers, a boy and a girl, both overweight and pale, got out and began walking cautiously towards us. They were holding hands. I jiggled my shoulder and Paul opened his eyes.

'That's not Alberta,' he said to me. He shut his eyes again.

'They're walking this way,' I told him.

'So what?' said Paul. He refused to move.

The pudgy girl squinted at us and said something into her boyfriend's ear. They stopped walking and looked us over. The girl was wearing a lot of dark make-up around her eyes. She had dark lipstick on too. The boy had stringy black hair and was wearing a hefty pair of black boots affixed with many buckles. The two of them could have been dressed up for Halloween, but it wasn't that time of year.

It appeared that no one else was going to do any talking so I said, 'Hello.'

'Hi,' said the girl.

Paul still had his head resting on my shoulder and I jerked it off so that he would sit up. He rubbed at his eyes and blinked at the rotund young couple in front of us.

'What the fuck happened to you two?' he said.

'I live here,' said the girl.

'Here?' said Paul.

'Yes.'

Paul stood up and turned around as if he didn't know there was a house behind him. I stood up too, trying to look apologetic.

'This is Alberta's house,' Paul said.

'Right,' said the girl. 'She's my mother.'

Paul eyed her sceptically. 'Your mother? What's your name?'

'Linda,' said the girl.

'Linda!' Paul cracked a smile and moved towards her. The girl stepped back, away from him. The boy shuffled uneasily in his enormous boots.

'I know your mother,' Paul said to the girl. 'And I know you too. I remember when you were just a little whippersnapper who wet her pants every morning. Remember that? You and me used to read the comics in the paper together. Boy, you've really grown up. Gotten fat, actually. It's me, Paul O'Malley, remember? What the fuck are you two doing to your faces anyway?'

Linda said, 'I don't remember you.'

'Sure you do,' said Paul. 'Seriously, what is that in your lip, a fish hook?' He was referring to a ring which Linda had stuck through a piercing in her lip. The boy had one too, except it was stuck through his eyebrow.

'My mom's not home yet,' said the girl. 'She's at work. She gets home at eight.'

'Great, no problem,' said Paul. 'We'll wait inside.'

He stepped aside so that Linda could get by. Linda and the boyfriend walked past us and opened the door.

'Don't do anything stupid,' said Linda. 'My mom's boyfriend will kick your ass if you mess anything up.'

'It's cool,' said Paul, 'I just want to take a nap.'

The house was cluttered with various knick-knacks, a lot of stuffed animals and products associated with the Ohio State football team. We sat down in the living room and talked to the kids for a while. Linda's boyfriend was named Ryan. They went to school together and had been dating for about three months. Ryan pulled out a pipe and offered us some marijuana, but Paul wouldn't touch it. He said it would keep him awake.

Linda and her boyfriend got bored with us and went into her bedroom and

shut the door. Paul poured himself a glass of milk from the refrigerator, sat back down on the living room couch, and turned on the television.

‘I’m going to leave now,’ I said.

‘No fucking way,’ said Paul.

‘Yes, I’m leaving.’

‘Just stay here until I fall asleep,’ he said. ‘I haven’t slept in five days.’

‘Turn off the TV then. Go to sleep.’

Paul turned off the TV, drank his milk, and lay back on the couch. I was tired too and decided I could use a little rest. I lay down on the shag-carpet floor and shut my eyes. Paul kept shifting about on the couch and cursing so I found it hard to actually sleep. I kept thinking I could hear Alberta coming and would sit up, afraid she’d find us lying there – and horrible confusion would ensue.

A rhythmic thumping noise drifted out of Linda’s bedroom and Paul said, ‘Hey, those kids are humping in there.’

He jumped up and before I could stop him he was knocking on Linda’s door saying, ‘Stop that, you fat little rabbits!’

He burst through the door and indeed the two of them were naked rolling about amongst the stuffed animals on her single bed.

Linda said, ‘Will you shut the door?’

Paul said, ‘Not until you get dressed!’

It was an uneasy standoff, but eventually Paul left them alone and lay back down on the couch. There was no more noise from Linda’s room and I finally fell asleep on that shag-carpet floor. When I woke up, Paul was in the kitchen coughing and making a big racket. I went in there and he was kneeling on the floor with his head stuck in the oven. The room smelled of gas.

‘What’s going on here?’ I asked.

‘Fuck,’ said Paul. ‘Shit.’

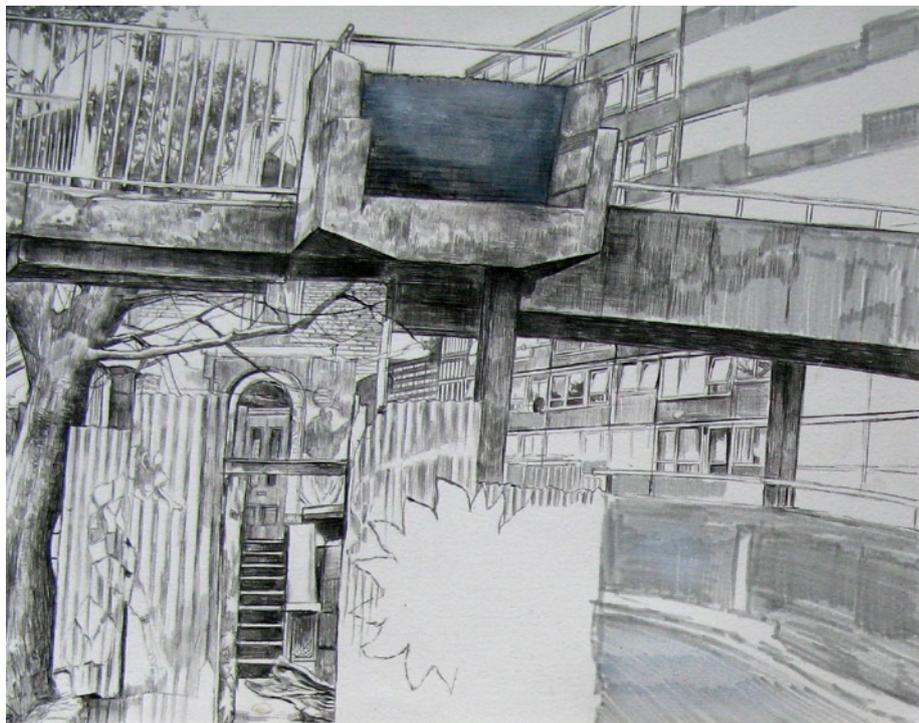
He was trying to inhale the gas fumes and kill himself but couldn’t create a proper seal around his head so the gas was escaping into the room. I grabbed his legs and pulled him away from the oven.

‘Leave me alone!’ he cried out.

We wrestled about on the kitchen floor and during the struggle Paul tried to kiss me, his hairy face and puckered lips lunging out towards mine.

‘I’m not a gay,’ he said. ‘I can’t sleep. Just kiss me.’

Finally I got him to calm down and we sat together on the linoleum floor,



breathing heavily, sucking in that gas-filled air.

‘I’ve got a headache,’ said Paul.

There was a clicking sound from Linda’s room and then a warm blue flame rushed across the hallway floor and burst into the kitchen with a loud hot boom. For a brief second the whole room filled up with a wall of fire and then suddenly we were sitting in the charred kitchen with little flames flickering around us. The paper towels were burning and so were some potholders and the curtains. Paul and I stood up and slapped at the flames and threw water everywhere. Ryan came in and helped us. We yanked the curtains down and tossed them in the sink. A smoke alarm went off and its shrill noise drove us nuts until Paul swatted it down with a broom. After a while we managed to put out all the fires in the house. The shag carpet was seared black and some of the stuffed animals were still smoking. Linda was crying in her bedroom. The place smelled awful now, like burnt plastic. Paul and I noticed that our hair was singed too. Our eyebrows were mostly gone and the skin on our faces was red and welted.

‘We could have died,’ said Paul.

‘That was your goal,’ I reminded him.

‘You had your head in the oven.’

Ryan apologized because it was his lighter which had set off the flame.

‘That’s what you get for smoking those doobies, you little fornicator.’ said Paul.

‘I’m sorry,’ said Ryan. He was really shaken up. We all were.

It was nearly eight o’clock and Alberta would soon be coming home. Paul decided maybe she wouldn’t be so happy to see him after all. He and I had a brief discussion away from the kids and then we dashed out to his little hatchback and drove away, leaving Linda and Ryan to explain the mess we’d left behind.

‘That Linda has really changed,’ said Paul. ‘I remember when she was just a cute small girl. Now look at her, all clad in black and punched full of metal.’

A police car passed us going the other way, its lights flashing and siren blaring. Paul began to get paranoid and insisted that we ditch the car. That was fine with me.

We parked the car on a side street and walked over to the bus station where we purchased two tickets to Seattle, a thirty-seven hour ride. As we waited for the bus to show up, Paul lay down across three of those plastic bus-stop seats and he finally fell asleep. It was chilly in there and those seats looked about as comfortable as a pile of rocks, but there he was, snoring away. I briefly considered waking him up when the bus arrived and they announced that it was time for us to load on, but then I thought better of it. He was still sleeping like a baby, curled up contentedly under those pale florescent lights, when we pulled away and headed west without him. ◇