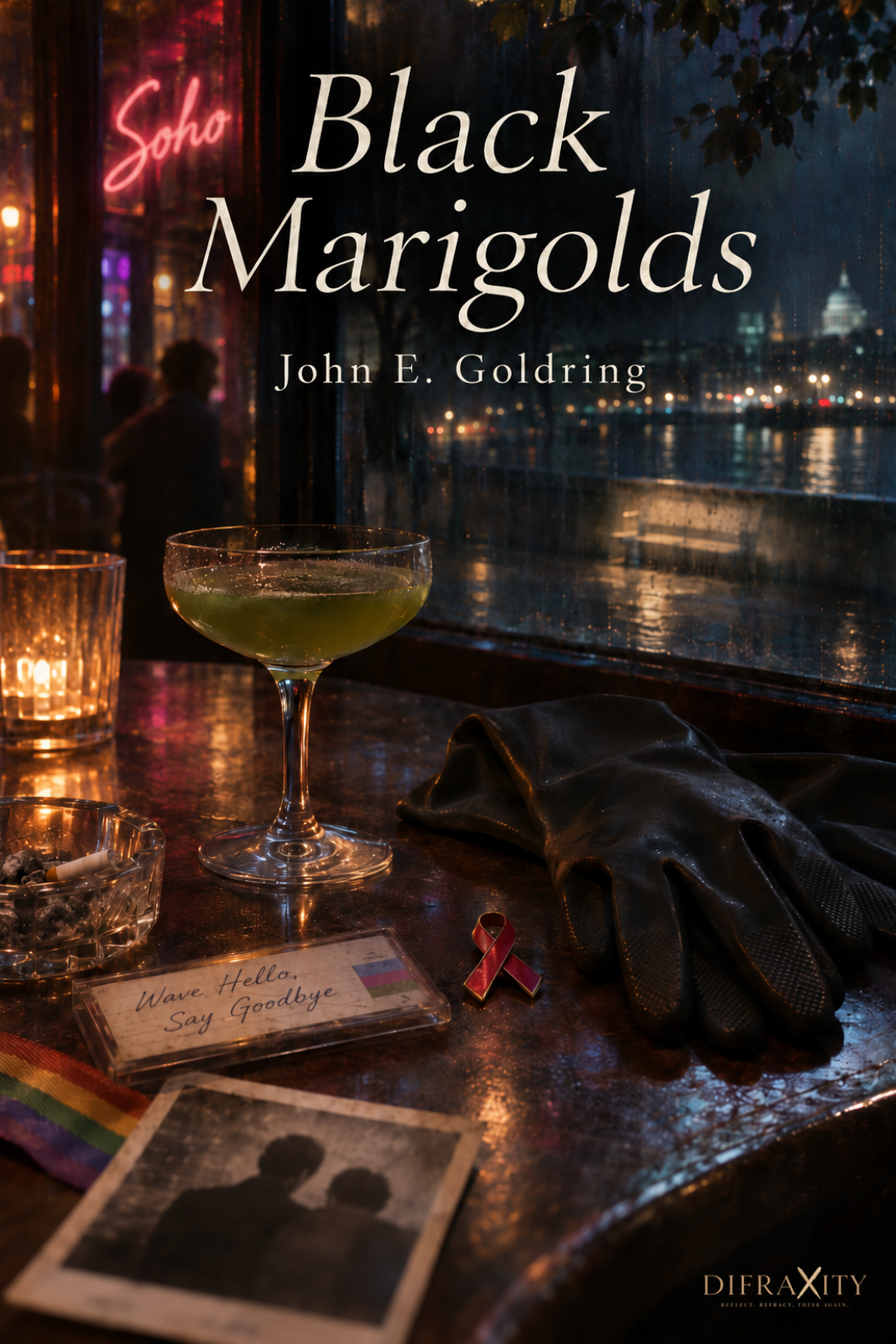

Soho
Black Marigolds
John E. Goldring
Wave Hello, Say Goodbye
DIFRAXITY
REFLECT. REFRACT. THINK AGAIN.

Black Marigolds

John E. Goldring

Difraxity

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Black Marigolds

I wasn’t planning on going out.

I’d told myself I would stay in, watch something trashy, maybe cook a proper tea. Something with vegetables in it. Something that suggested I was still in charge of my life.

Then I got the itch.

You know the one.

That little voice that says, you could be dead tomorrow, so get your shoes on.

So I did.

Compton’s was heaving. It always is. There are certain places in London that seem incapable of being quiet, as if silence would get them closed down by the council.

I stood at the bar pretending I knew what I wanted.

The barman was one of those beautiful men who looked like he had been carved rather than born. All teeth and shoulders and confidence.

He smiled, winked, and said, “Something fruity?”

“Yes, please,” I said.

He gave me a cocktail with a name that sounded like a warning.

I didn’t know they did cocktails in there. Shows how long it had been. It made me think of that one you used to order. The thing that looked like it had been scooped out of a nuclear waste dump. Didn’t taste much better, if memory serves.

I remember it made me dizzy.

Like sniffing too much poppers.

Goodness knows what they put in it.

You said it was “an acquired taste”.

I said, “So is syphilis.”

You laughed so hard you nearly fell off the bar stool.

Anyway.

Back to tonight.

That was when he walked in.

Leather jacket. Muir cap so shiny you could shave in the reflection. Very butch from a distance, which is often where butch works best.

Then he got closer.

Smug grin. Voice like a squeaky hinge. Camp as Christmas.

I thought, well, at least he’s confident.

We chatted.

He said he worked in tech.

I said, “Oh, can you fix printers?”

He didn’t laugh.

That should have been warning enough.

We danced.

Well, I danced. He hovered. Like a confused aunt at a wedding who has decided to join in but regrets it immediately.

Then he kissed me.

Wet.

Like a dog drinking from a bowl.

And later — well, let's just say, as soon as the black Marigolds came out, I knew that was my cue to leave.

You always said kissing was a promise.

That chap tonight promised nothing but squeaky hinges, damp socks, and the smell of leather furniture polish.

I walked home along the South Bank.

The river was showing off. All glitter and moonlight, pretending to be romantic. But underneath it was darkness. Proper darkness. The kind that keeps things. The kind that makes you wonder what it has swallowed over the years and never given back.

And I thought, why do we do this?

Why do I do this?

Why do I keep chasing these little moments, hoping one of them will turn into magic?

Then I saw the place where the bench used to be.

Our bench.

Gone now, of course.

Progress, they call it.

Funny, isn't it, how a lump of wood can hold more memories than a photo album? Even in its absence, it still had the nerve to make me think of you.

You were always so beautifully turned out.

Even when you were a mess.

Especially then, perhaps.

You smelled of expensive soap. Not that cheap stuff you could smell everywhere in the bars. Yours was clean and quiet and costly. Even

when we were falling out of a club at three in the morning, you smelled like someone who had made plans for the following day.

Maybe that is why I still go out.

Not for the men. God help us, certainly not for the men.

For the possibility.

To see if I can catch even a tiny bit of what I had with you.

The singing.

The dancing.

The laughing at things we had no business laughing at.

Do you remember that song you loved?

Say Hello, Wave Goodbye.

Funny thing, the other one died recently. What was he called? I can never remember. I know Marc Almond was one of them. Now, he had a very dirty reputation. They used to call him the Head Girl. Can't imagine why.

And that story about the stomach pump after some very adventurous evening in a darkroom. Apparently it was an urban myth. Linked to David Bowie as well, and Britney Spears, would you believe.

Britney Spears.

Imagine dragging that poor woman into it.

And talking of reputations.

Do you remember what we used to call you when you first came on the scene?

Eighteen years old and very popular with a certain sort of gentleman caller.

Oh, what was it now?

It’ll come to me.

It always does, usually when I’ve stopped trying.

Things have changed so much, haven’t they?

Safer now. Or safer in some ways. Most of them are on PrEP. All very casual about it. Little blue pills in little plastic boxes. Not having to worry in the same way we did.

Such a shame it wasn’t around sooner.

Would have saved so many lives.

Mind you, I hope they don’t mix it up with Viagra. Same colour, you know. Not that I would know anything about that.

I am revealing more than I should.

Then again, I always did.

Talking of poppers, you’ll never guess what happened a few years back. They were going to ban them. Can you imagine? After everything else, that was apparently the problem.

They got an MP to stand up in the House of Commons and say poppers were an important part of gay men’s sex lives.

In the House of Commons.

Can you imagine that forty years ago?

A gay man standing there, in that place, saying poppers were part of our culture and shouldn’t be banned.

Forty years ago, you could have been arrested for having them in your pocket.

Arrested, beaten, mocked, and still expected to be grateful it wasn’t worse.

Do you remember Howard?

Hairdresser Howard.

Always had a bottle of poppers welded to his nose.

And never out of that cottage on — what was the road called? It'll come to me. He was always there. Like it was his office.

He actually called it his office.

Somehow managed to talk about cottaging as if he was providing a public service.

Some of the lads used to buy a day ticket and do the full route, like a sightseeing tour.

And Beryl.

Oh my God, Beryl.

Remember when some poor punter thought he was the bog cleaner because he was always in there? Told him he needed to keep the place cleaner.

Beryl was furious.

Not because the man had insulted him.

Because he had a point.

I remember when Freddie Mercury died.

I had no idea he was gay.

I know. I know.

John laughed at me for that.

"He was in a group called Queen," he said.

Fair point.

Still, I just thought he was theatrical. In those days, everyone on television seemed theatrical. You couldn't move for feathers, eyeliner, and men in trousers tight enough to require medical supervision.

When I said, "You'll be telling me next George Michael is gay," John just looked at me.

That look.

The one people gave me when my gaydar had failed so badly it should have been recalled by the manufacturer.

Of course, George had to come out years later because he got caught cottaging.

Typical, really.

Some people get a magazine cover.

Some people get a police report.

Anyway, I stood there by the river, staring at that empty space where our bench used to be, and suddenly I remembered.

Brenda.

That was it.

Brenda.

That was what we called you.

You had that innocent look, and that walk. Oh, that walk. So camp it needed its own postcode. Arms folded across your chest as if you were hiding something from the world, though God knows what. There was very little you managed to hide for long.

Do you remember the night I shouted "Brenda!" across the bar and about ten queens turned round?

Ready to answer.

Ready to be loved.

Ready to complain.

We had good times, didn't we?

We really did.

The sort of times that felt as if they would last forever, which is how you know they won't.

Then, one by one, people started disappearing.

At first there were rumours. Then hospital visits. Then funerals. Then names you stopped saying out loud because every name opened a door you didn't have the strength to walk through.

But we still went out.

Of course we did.

What else were we supposed to do?

Sit at home and behave?

We knew it might be us tomorrow.

So we danced tonight.

I'm still not sure how I didn't catch it.

Luck, I suppose.

Luck is a horrible thing when other people don't have any.

I dodged it somehow.

But it took so many of us.

Including you, honey.

Still, sometimes, when the music fades and the city goes quiet, I swear I hear you laugh.

Love you.

About the Author

John E. Goldring is a writer, songwriter and academic whose work explores love, identity, memory and the complicated business of being human.

Drawing on personal experience, social history and a distinctly irreverent sense of humour, his writing moves between tenderness, uncomfortable truths and the absurdities of everyday life.

Black Marigolds is part of a developing collection of short stories published through Difraxity.

About Difraxity

Virtual Artists. Real Stories.

Difraxity is an independent UK creative studio and imprint. Its literary publications include short fiction.

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