Overnight to many distant cities

[by] Donald Barthelme.

"KALEIDOSCOPICALLY MESMERIZING... POWERFULLY ILLUMINATING"

—VILLAGE VOICE

From New York to Tokyo to Copenhagen to the Radiant City of Le Corbusier, this sophisticated and surreal collection of short stories and brief visionary texts takes us on an exhilarating tour of the modern urbanand psychological—landscape. Alexandra, a designer of artificial ruins, creates a ruined wall with classical columns and a number of broken urns for a park in Arizona; a journalist for a magazine called Folks sets out to interview nine people who have been struck by lightning; and a retired messman steals fifty-three mothballed ships from the U.S. government.

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Fiction

DONALD BARTHELME

OVERNIGHT TO MAI

CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN FICTION

BARANTO

OVERNIGHT MANY SAMOU



-ANNE TYLER

"MESMERIZING" —VILLAGE VOICE

Overnight to Many Distant Cities

Donald Barthelme



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To Marion

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They called for more structure, then, so we brought in some big hairy four-by-fours from the back shed and nailed them into place with railroad spikes. This new city, they said, was going to be just jim-dandy, would make architects stutter, would make Chambers of Commerce burst into flame. We would have our own witch doctors, and strange gods aplenty, and site-specific sins, and humuhumunukunukuapuaa in the public fish bowls. We workers listened with our mouths agape. We had never heard anything like it. But we trusted our instincts and our paychecks, so we pressed on, bringing in color-coated steel from the back shed and anodized aluminum from the shed behind that. Oh radiant city! we said to ourselves, how we want you to be built! Workplace democracy was practiced on the job, and the clerk-of-the-works (who had known Wiwi Lönn in Finland) wore a little cap with a little feather, very jaunty. There was never any question of hanging back (although we noticed that our ID cards were of a color different from their ID cards); the exercise of our skills, and the promise of the city, were enough. By the light of the moon we counted our chisels and told stories of other building feats we had been involved in: Babel, Chandigarh, Brasilia, Taliesin.

At dawn each day, an eight-mile run, to condition ourselves for the implausible exploits ahead.

The enormous pumping station, clad in red Lego, at the point where the new river will be activated . . .

Areas of the city, they told us, had been designed to rot, fall into desuetude, return, in time, to open space. Perhaps, they said, fawns would one day romp there, on the crumbling brick. We were slightly skeptical about this part of the plan, but it was, after all, a plan, the ferocious integrity of the detailing impressed us all, and standing by the pens containing the fawns who would father the fawns who might some day romp on the crumbling brick, one could not help but notice one's chest bursting with anticipatory pride.

High in the air, working on a setback faced with alternating bands of gray and rose stone capped with grids of gray glass, we moistened our brows with the tails of our shirts, which had been dipped into a pleasing brine, lit new cigars, and saw the new city spread out beneath us, in the shape of the word FASTIGIUM. Not the name of the city, they told us, simply a set of letters selected for the elegance of the script. The little girl dead behind the rosebushes came back to life, and the passionate

construction continued.

Visitors

It's three o'clock in the morning.

Bishop's daughter is ill, stomach pains. She's sleeping on the couch.

Bishop too is ill, chills and sweating, a flu. He can't sleep. In bed, he listens to the occasional groans from two rooms away. Katie is fifteen and spends the summer with him every year.

Outside on the street, someone kicks on a motor-cycle and revs it unforgivingly. His bedroom is badly placed.

He's given her Pepto-Bismol, if she wakes again he'll try Tylenol. He wraps himself in the sheet, pulls his t-shirt away from his damp chest.

There's a radio playing somewhere in the building, big-band music, he feels rather than hears it. The steady, friendly air-conditioner hustling in the next room.

Earlier he'd taken her to a doctor, who found nothing. "You've got a bellyache," the doctor said,

"stick with fluids and call me if it doesn't go away." Katie is beautiful, tall with dark hair.

In the afternoon they'd gone, groaning, to a horror movie about wolves taking over the city. At vivid moments she jumped against him, pressing her breasts into his back. He moved away.

When they walk together on the street she takes his arm, holding on tightly (because, he figures, she spends so much of her time away, away). Very often people give them peculiar looks.

He's been picking up old ladies who've been falling down in front of him, these last few days. One sitting in the middle of an intersection waving her arms while dangerous Checkers curved around her. The old ladies invariably display a superb fighting spirit. "Thank you, young man!"

He's forty-nine. Writing a history of 19th Century American painting, about which he knows a thing or two.

Not enough.

A groan, heartfelt but muted, from the other room. She's awake.

He gets up and goes in to look at her. The redand-white cotton robe she's wearing is tucked up under her knees. "I just threw up again," she says.

"Did it help?"

"A little."

He once asked her what something (a box? a chair?) was made of and she told him it was made out of tree.

"Do you want to try a glass of milk?"

"I don't want any milk," she says, turning to lie on her front. "Sit with me."

He sits on the edge of the couch and rubs her back. "Think of something terrific," he says. "Let's get your mind off your stomach. Think about fishing. Think about the time you threw the hotel keys

out of the window." Once, in Paris, she had done just that, from a sixth-floor window, and Bishop had had visions of some Frenchman walking down the Quai des Grands-Augustins with a set of heavy iron hotel keys buried in his brain. He'd found the keys in a potted plant outside the hotel door.

"Daddy," she says, not looking at him.

"Yes?"

"Why do you live like this? By yourself?"

"Who am I going to live with?"

"You could find somebody. You're handsome for your age."

"Oh very good. That's very neat. I thank you."

"You don't try."

This is and is not true.

"How much do you weigh?"

"One eighty-five."

"You could lose some weight."

"Look, kid, gimme a break." He blots his forehead with his arm. "You want some cambric tea?"

"You've given up."

"Not so," he says. "Katie, go to sleep now. Think of a great big pile of Gucci handbags."

She sighs and turns her head away.

Bishop goes into the kitchen and turns on the light. He wonders what a drink would do to him, or for him—put him to sleep? He decides against it. He turns on the tiny kitchen TV and spends a few minutes watching some kind of Japanese monster movie. The poorly designed monster is picking up handfuls of people and, rather thoughtfully, eating them. Bishop thinks about Tokyo. He was once in bed with a Japanese girl during a mild earthquake, and he's never forgotten the feeling of the floor falling out from underneath him, or the woman's terror. He suddenly remembers her name, Michiko. "You no butterfly on me?" she had asked, when they

met. He was astonished to learn that "butterfly" meant, in the patois of the time, "abandon." She cooked their meals over a charcoal brazier and they slept in a niche in the wall closed off from the rest of her room by sliding paper doors. Bishop worked on the copy desk at Stars & Stripes. One day a wire photo came in showing the heads of the four (then) women's services posing for a group portrait. Bishop slugged the caption LEADING LADIES. The elderly master sergeant who was serving as city editor brought the photo back to Bishop's desk. "We can't do this," he said. "Ain't it a shame?"

He switches channels and gets Dolly Parton singing, by coincidence, "House of the Rising Sun."

At some point during each summer she'll say:

"Why did you and my mother split up?"

"It was your fault," he answers. "Yours. You made too much noise, as a kid, I couldn't work." His exwife had once told Katie this as an explanation for the divorce, and he'll repeat it until its untruth is marble, a monument.

His ex-wife is otherwise very sensible, and thrifty, too.

Why do I live this way? Best I can do.

Walking down West Broadway on a Saturday afternoon. Barking art caged in the high white galleries, don't go inside or it'll get you, leap into your lap and cover your face with kisses. Some goes to the other extreme, snarls and shows its brilliant teeth. O art I won't hurt you if you don't hurt me. Citizens parading, plump-faced and bone-faced, lightly clad. A young black boy toting a Board of Education trombone case. A fellow with oddly-cut hair the color of marigolds and a roll of roofing felt over his shoulder.

Bishop in the crowd, thirty dollars in his pocket in case he has to buy a pal a drink.

Into a gallery because it must be done. The artist's hung twenty EVERLAST heavy bags in rows of four, you're invited to have a bash. People are giving the bags every kind of trouble. Bishop, unable to resist, bangs one with his fabled left, and hurts his hand.

Bloody artists.

Out on the street again, he is bumped into by a man, then another man, then a woman. And here's Harry in lemon pants with his Britisher friend, Malcolm.

"Harry, Malcolm."

"Professor," Harry says ironically (he is a professor, Bishop is not).

Harry's got not much hair and has lost weight since he split with Tom. Malcolm is the single most cheerful individual Bishop has ever met.

Harry's university has just hired a new president who's thirty-two. Harry can't get over it.

"Thirty-two! I mean I don't think the board's got both oars in the water."

Standing behind Malcolm is a beautiful young woman.

"This is Christie," Malcolm says. "We've just given her lunch. We've just eaten all the dim sum in the world."

Bishop is immediately seized by a desire to cook for Christie—either his Eight-Bean Soup or his Crash Cassoulet.

She's telling him something about her windows.

"I don't care but why under my windows?"

She's wearing a purple shirt and is deeply tanned with black hair—looks like an Indian, in fact, the one who sells Mazola on TV.

Harry is still talking about the new president. "I mean he did his dissertation on bathing trends."

"Well maybe he knows where the big bucks are." There's some leftover duck in the refrigerator he can use for the cassoulet.

"Well," he says to Christie, "are you hungry?" "Yes," she says, "I am."

"We just ate," Harry says. "You can't be hungry. You can't possibly be hungry."

"Hungry, hungry," she says, taking Bishop's arm, which is, can you believe it, sticking out.

Putting slices of duck in bean water while Christie watches "The Adventures of Robin Hood," with Errol Flynn and Basil Rathbone, on the kitchen TV. At the same time Hank Williams Ir. is singing on the FM.

"I like a place where I can take my shoes off," she says, as Errol Flynn throws a whole dead deer on the banquet table.

Bishop, chopping parsley, is taking quick glances at her to see what she looks like with a glass of wine in her hand. Some people look good with white wine, some don't.

He makes a mental note to buy some Mazola—a case, maybe.

"Here's sixty seconds on fenders," says the radio.

"Do you live with anybody?" Christie asks.

"My daughter is here sometimes. Summers and Christmas." A little tarragon into the bean water. "How about you?"

"There's this guy."

But there had to be. Bishop chops steadfastly with his Three Sheep brand Chinese chopper, made in gray Fusan.

"He's an artist."

As who is not? "What kind of an artist?"

"A painter. He's in Seattle. He needs rain."

He throws handfuls of sliced onions into the water, then a can of tomato paste.

"How long does this take?" Christie asks. "I'm not rushing you, I'm just curious."

"Another hour."

"Then I'll have a little vodka. Straight. Ice. If you don't mind."

Bishop loves women who drink.

Maybe she smokes!

"Actually I can't stand artists," she says.

"Like who in particular?"

"Like that woman who puts chewing gum on her stomach—"

"She doesn't do that any more. And the chewing gum was not poorly placed."

"And that other one who cuts off parts of himself, whittles on himself, that fries my ass."

"It's supposed to."

"Yeah," she says, shaking the ice in her glass. "I'm reacting like a bozo."

She gets up and walks over to the counter and takes a Lark from his pack.

Very happily, Bishop begins to talk. He tells her that the night before he had smelled smoke, had gotten up and checked the apartment, knowing that a pier was on fire over by the river and suspecting it was that. He had turned on the TV to get the allnews channel and while dialing had encountered the opening credits of a Richard Widmark cop film called "Brock's Last Case" which he had then sat down and watched, his faithful Scotch at his side, until five o'clock in the morning. Richard Widmark was one of his favorite actors in the whole world, he told her, because of the way in which Richard Widmark was able to convey, what was the word, resilience. You could knock Richard Widmark down,

he said, you could even knock Richard Widmark down repeatedly, but you had better bear in mind while knocking Richard Widmark down that Richard Widmark was pretty damn sure going to bounce back up and batter your conk—

"Redford is the one I like," she says.

Bishop can understand this. He nods seriously.

"The thing I like about Redford is," she says, and for ten minutes she tells him about Robert Redford.

He tastes the cassoulet with a long spoon. More salt.

It appears that she is also mighty fond of Clint Eastwood.

Bishop has the sense that the conversation has strayed, like a bad cow, from the proper path.

"Old Clint Eastwood," he says, shaking his head admiringly. "We're ready."

He dishes up the cassoulet and fetches hot bread from the oven.

"Tastes like real cassoulet," she says.

"That's the ox-tail soup mix." Why is he serving her cassoulet in summer? It's hot.

He's opened a bottle of Robert Mondavi table red. "Very good," she says. "I mean I'm surprised. Really."

"Maybe could have had more tomato."

"No, really." She tears off a fistful of French bread. "Men are quite odd. I saw this guy at the farmer's market on Union Square on Saturday? He was standing in front of a table full of greens and radishes and corn and this and that, behind a bunch of other people, and he was staring at this farmergirl who was wearing cut-offs and a tank top and every time she leaned over to grab a cabbage or whatnot he was getting a shot of her breasts, which were, to be fair, quite pretty—I mean how much fun can that be?"

"Moderate amount of fun. Some fun. Not much fun. What can I say?"

"And that plug I live with."

"What about him?"

"He gave me a book once."

"What was it?"

"Book about how to fix home appliances. The dishwasher was broken. Then he bought me a screwdriver. This really nice screwdriver."

"Well."

"I fixed the damned dishwasher. Took me two days."

"Would you like to go to bed now?"

"No," Christie says, "not yet."

Not yet! Very happily, Bishop pours more wine.

Now he's sweating, little chills at intervals. He gets a sheet from the bedroom and sits in the kitchen with the sheet draped around him, guru-style. He can hear Katie turning restlessly on the couch.

He admires the way she organizes her life—that is, the way she gets done what she wants done. A little wangling, a little nagging, a little let's-go-take-a-look and Bishop has sprung for a new pair of boots, handsome ankle-height black diablo numbers that she'll wear with black ski pants . . .

Well, he doesn't give her many presents.

Could he bear a Scotch? He thinks not.

He remembers a dream in which he dreamed that his nose was as dark and red as a Bing cherry. As would be appropriate.

"Daddy?"

Still wearing the yellow sheet, he gets up and goes into the other room.

"I can't sleep."

"I'm sorry."

"Talk to me."

Bishop sits again on the edge of the couch. How large she is!

He gives her his Art History lecture.

"Then you get Mo-net and Ma-net, that's a little tricky, Mo-net was the one did all the water lilies and shit, his colors were blues and greens, Ma-net was the one did Bareass On the Grass and shit, his colors were browns and greens. Then you get Bonnard, he did all the interiors and shit, amazing light, and then you get Van Guk, he's the one with the ear and shit, and Say-zanne, he's the one with the apples and shit, you get Kandinsky, a bad mother, all them pick-upsticks pictures, you get my man Mondrian, he's the one with the rectangles and shit, his colors were red yellow and blue, you get Moholy-Nagy, he did all the plastic thingummies and shit, you get Mar-cel Duchamp, he's the devil in human form. . . ."

She's asleep.

Bishop goes back into the kitchen and makes himself a drink.

It's five-thirty. Faint light in the big windows.

Christie's in Seattle, and plans to stay.

Looking out of the windows in the early morning he can sometimes see the two old ladies who live in the apartment whose garden backs up to his building having breakfast by candlelight. He can never figure out whether they are terminally romantic or whether, rather, they're trying to save electricity. Financially, the paper is quite healthy. The paper's timberlands, mining interests, pulp and paper operations, book, magazine, corrugated-box, and greeting-card divisions, film, radio, television, and cable companies, and data-processing and satellite-communications groups are all flourishing, with over-all return on invested capital increasing at about eleven per cent a year. Compensation of the three highest-paid officers and directors last year was \$399,500, \$362,700, and \$335,400 respectively, exclusive of profit-sharing and pension-plan accruals.

But top management is discouraged and saddened, and middle management is drinking too much. Morale in the newsroom is fair, because of the recent raises, but the shining brows of the copy boys, traditional emblems of energy and hope, have begun to display odd, unattractive lines. At every level, even down into the depths of the pressroom, where the pressmen defiantly wear their square dirty folded-paper caps, people want management to stop what it is doing before it is too late.

The new VDT machines have hurt the paper, no doubt about it. The people in the newsroom don't like the machines. (A few say they like the machines but these are the same people who like the washrooms.) When the machines go down, as they do, not infrequently, the people in the newsroom laugh and cheer. The executive editor has installed one-way glass in his office door, and stands behind it looking out over the newsroom, fretting and

groaning. Recently the paper ran the same stock tables every day for a week. No one noticed, no one complained.

Middle management has implored top management to alter its course. Top management has responded with postdated guarantees, on a sliding scale. The Guild is off in a corner, whimpering. The pressmen are holding an unending series of birthday parties commemorating heroes of labor. Reporters file their stories as usual, but if they are certain kinds of stories they do not run. A small example: the paper did not run a Holiday Weekend Death Toll story after Labor Day this year, the first time since 1926 no Holiday Weekend Death Toll story appeared in the paper after Labor Day (and the total was, although not a record, a substantial one).

Some elements of the staff are not depressed. The paper's very creative real-estate editor has been a fountain of ideas, and his sections, full of color pictures of desirable living arrangements, are choked with advertising and make the Sunday paper fat, fat, fat, fat. More food writers have been hired, and more clothes writers, and more furniture writers, and more plant writers. The bridge, whist, skat, cribbage, domino, and vingt-et-un columnists are very popular.

The Editors' Caucus has once again applied to middle management for relief, and has once again been promised it (but middle management has Glenfiddich on its breath, even at breakfast). Top management's polls say that sixty-five per cent of the readers "want movies," and feasibility studies are being conducted. Top management acknowledges, over long lunches at good restaurants, that the readers are wrong to "want movies" but insists that morality cannot be legislated. The newsroom has been insulated (with products from the company's Echotex division) so that the people in the newsroom can no longer hear the sounds in the streets.

The paper's editorials have been subcontracted to Texas Instruments, and the obituaries to Nabisco, so that the staff will have "more time to think." The foreign desk is turning out language lessons ("Yo temo que Isabel no venga," "I am afraid that Isabel will not come"). There was an especially lively front page on Tuesday. The No. 1 story was pepperoni—a useful and exhaustive guide. It ran right next to the slimming-your-troublesome-thighs story, with pictures.

Top management has vowed to stop what it is doing—not now but soon, soon. A chamber orchestra has been formed among the people in the newsroom, and we play Haydn until the sun comes up.

Affection

How do you want to cook this fish? How do you want to cook this fish? Harris asked.

What?

Claire heard: How do you want to cook this fish? Breaded, she said.

Fine, Harris said.

What?

Fine!

We have not slept together for three hundred nights, she thought. We have not slept together for three hundred nights.

His rough, tender hands not wrapped around me. Lawnmower. His rough, tender hands wrapped around the handles of the lawnmower. Not around me.

What?

Where did you hide the bread crumbs?

What?

The bread crumbs!

Behind the Cheerios!

Claire telephoned her mother. Her mother's counsel was broccoli, mostly, but who else was she going to talk to?

What?

You have to be optimistic. Be be be. Optimistic.

What?

Optimistic, her mother said, they go through phases. As they get older. They have less tolerance for monotony.

I'm monotony?

They go through phases. As they grow older. They like to think that their futures are ahead of them. This is ludicrous, of course—

Oh oh oh oh.

Ludicrous, of course, but I have never yet met one who didn't think that way until he got played out then they sink into a comfortable lassitude take to wearing those horrible old-geezer hats . . .

What?

Hats with the green plastic bills, golf hats or whatever they are—

Harris, Claire said to her husband, you've stopped watering the plants.

What?

You've stopped watering the plants my mother always said that when they stopped watering the plants that was a sure sign of an impending marital breakup.

Your mother reads too much.

What?

Sarah decided that she and Harris should not sleep together any longer.

Harris said, What about hugging?

What?

Hugging.

Sarah said that she would have a ruling on hug-

ging in a few days and that he should stand by for further information. She pulled the black lace mantilla down to veil her face as they left the empty church.

I have done the right thing the right thing. I am right.

Claire came in wearing her brown coat and carrying a large brown paper bag. Look what I got! she said excitedly.

What? Harris said.

She reached into the bag and pulled out a smeary plastic tray with six frozen shell steaks on it. The steaks looked like they had died in the nineteenth century.

Six dollars! Claire said. This guy came into the laundromat and said he was making deliveries to restaurants and some of the restaurants already had all the steaks they needed and now he had these left over and they were only six dollars. Six dollars.

You spent six dollars on these?

Other people bought some too.

Diseased, stolen steaks?

He was wearing a white coat, Claire said. He had a truck.

I'll bet he had a truck.

Harris went to see Madam Olympia, a reader and advisor. Her office was one room in a bad part of the city. Chicken wings burned in a frying pan on the stove. She got up and turned them off, then got up and turned them on again. She was wearing a t-shirt that had "Buffalo, City of No Illusions" printed on it.

Tell me about yourself, she said.

My life is hell, Harris said. He sketched the circumstances.