

LOFT

Issue V



Daniel Addercouth grew up on a remote farm in the north of Scotland but now lives in Berlin, Germany. His stories have appeared in Free Flash Fiction, New Flash Fiction Review, and Ink Sweat & Tears, among other places. He was recently shortlisted for the Bath Flash Fiction Award. You can find him on Twitter/X and Bluesky at @RuralUnease.

Kehinde Mercy Adeleke, a young writer, is a graduate of English and International Studies. She is a Nigerian based in Nigeria. She started out writing poems and flash fictions on her social media pages before diving into freelance writing. In the past four years of writing professionally, Kehinde has established as one of the best fiction writers in the country. At the moment, Kehinde has a collection of short stories about to be published.

Junaid Ahmed Ahangar is a doctor, working currently as a resident in a tertiary care institute in Srinagar, Kashmir which has been a conflict zone for the most part of the last century continuing on to this day. Growing up, he has been profoundly influenced by the likes of authors like Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Milan Kundera, Julian Barnes, Kiran Desai, Arundhati Roy, Orhan Pamuk, Naipaul and poets like Edgar Allan Poe, Tennyson, Tagore, Rilke, Wislawa Szymborska, Agha Shahid Ali, Sherko Bekas, Mahmoud Dervish, Dylan Thomas to name a few. He has constantly delved into philosophy as well, the likes of Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Marx, etc. He graduated from Dhaka and completed his masters in medicine in Srinagar. He also has a masters in English literature which he obtained in India in 2023.

Rehman Anwer is a public servant, a human rights activist and author based in London. He was born and raised in Lahore, Pakistan and studied human rights at Kingston University, London. His debut book, *The Fundamentals of Sufism*, is mainly about dispelling myths and exploring the gendered dimension of Sufism. Rehman also has a keen interest in existential literature and absurdist fiction. 'Making Sense of Absurdity' is his first fiction work. He tweets at @rehmananwer.

Alison Armstrong has work in *Crossways*, *Bangor Literary Journal*, *Confino*, *The Cardiff Review*, *3:AM*, *Thresholds* and *North Country: An anthology of Landscape and Place Writing*. Saraband Books published her first novel *Fossils* last year. Her first play was performed in 2021, supported by a Royal Society of Literature, Literature Matters Award and the Arts Council. She has won two Northern Writers' Awards for short fiction (2017 and 2023) and has been shortlisted for several others. She is working on a landscape memoir, supported by The Author's Foundation (Society of Authors) and Arts Council England.

Robert Nazar Arjoyan was born into the Armenian diaspora of Glendale, California. Aside from an arguably ill-advised foray into rock n roll bandery, literature and movies were the vying forces of his life. Naz graduated from USC's School of Cinematic Arts and now works as an author and filmmaker. Find him at www.arjoyan.com.

Ali Ashhar is a poet, short story writer and columnist from Jaunpur, India. He is the author of the poetry collection, *Mirror of Emotions*. Following the release of his book, he was chosen as the Best Debut Author for the year 2021 by *The Indian Awaz* and was the recipient of a India Prime 100 Authors Award. His works appear in *Indian Review*, *The Raven Review* and *The Bosphorus Review of Books*, among others.

Ben Banyard lives in Portishead, on the Severn Estuary just outside of Bristol, UK. His third collection, *Hi-Viz* was published by Yaffle Press in 2021 and is available via his website: <https://benbanyard.wordpress.com>. Ben also edits *Black Nore Review*: <https://blacknorereview.wordpress.com>

Norah Blakedon lives in northwest England. When her head isn't buried in a book, she's usually writing, or can be found amongst nature with her dog in tow.

MJ Burns is a queer, Scottish writer and artist. They studied English Literature at the University of St Andrews, and have Masters degrees in Creative Writing and Comics & Graphic Novels at the Universities of Aberdeen and Dundee. MJ has writing published in *Gutter*, *little living room*, *Shoreline of Infinity* and *Tangled Web*. They are also working on a graphic novel adaptation of James Hogg's 'Confessions of a Justified Sinner'. You can find their artwork and updates on Instagram and Twitter @mjburns_art.

Fiona Cahill has previously featured in the London Magazine, Paris Lit Up, An Capall Dorcha, and others. She won the 2023 Waterford prize and was shortlisted for the Fish prize, the Bridport prize, and the Listowel Writers Week Collection Award.

Margaret Cahill is a writer from Limerick, Ireland. Her short stories have featured in The Milk House, époque press é-zine, The Ogham Stone, Honest Ulsterman, HeadStuff, Silver Apples, Autonomy anthology, Incubator, Crannog, Galway Review, Limerick Magazine, Boyne Berries and The Linnet's Wings. She also dabbles in writing about music and art, with publications on HeadStuff.org and in Circa Arts Magazine.

Born in New Jersey and raised in New York, Jayson Carcione now lives in Cork, Ireland. His short fiction has appeared in The London Magazine, The Forge, Lunate, Epoque Press, Passengers Journal, Across the Margin, Dark Winter Literary Magazine, and elsewhere. His fiction was also highly commended in the 2020 Sean O'Faoláin International Short Story Competition.

Twitter: @carcionejay

Sara Collie is a writer and language tutor based in the east of England. She has a PhD in French Literature and a lifelong fascination with the way that words and stories shape and define us. Her writing explores the wild, uncertain spaces of nature, the complexities of mental health, and the mysteries of the creative process. Her poetry and prose have appeared in Neon Door, The Selkie, Confluence, Synkroniciti, Stonecrop Review, Full Mood Magazine and elsewhere.

Christine Collinson writes historical short fiction. Her debut Flash Fiction Collection will be published in August '23 by Ellipsis Zine. Over the past five years, her work has been widely featured in online journals and print anthologies. Find her on Twitter @collinson26.

Laura Cooney is a writer and spoken word poet from Edinburgh. She writes for both children and adults and is currently working on both a children's fantasy novel, a cosy crime novella and a single collection of poems for both. Her sold out chapbook Motherbunnet will be followed by No Trauma/No Drama courtesy of Backroom Poetry in August 2024. See more of Laura on Twitter/X: @lozzawriting and on her website www.lozzawriting.com. When she's not writing, she'll be found with her daughters, as close to the sea as possible, seeking shells. There will be ice-cream!

Michael Daviot has been a professional actor and playwright for forty years. He has written half a dozen plays and nine solo shows, including A Vision (about W B Yeats and Maud Gonne) and Nosferatu's Shadow (about Max Schreck and the rise of the Nazis). Favourite roles include Scarecrow, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Prospero. During and after lockdown he wrote 24 short stories and a novel. 'Softly and Suddenly' is the first of those pieces to be published.

Rob 'Probert' Dean won the PFD prize for his yet unpublished novel, and has had writing published and shortlisted in a few spots here and there.

Jeremy Dixon lives near the Yorkshire coast, where he works as a builder. Having always been a passionate amateur, he's now trying to take his writing more seriously, recently graduating with a B.A in 'English Literature and Creative Writing' from The Open University. He teaches creative writing night classes and has been published in the 'Glittery Literary Anthology Four' and 'Sky Island Journal'.

Linda Drattell upon completing a full-length work of fiction which she is fervently working to get published, she fills her time writing poetry and flash fiction. Her poetry has appeared in both online publications and anthologies, and a collection of her poems, Remember This Day, will be published in August 2023 by Finishing Line Press. A short story was published in the California Writers Club/Tri-Valley Chapter's anthology, Voices of the Valley: Through the Window. She co-authored a children's book, Who Wants to be Friends With a Dragon?, which is scheduled to be published in December 2022. She serves on the boards of the California Communications Access Foundation and the California Writers Club/Tri-Valley Writers Branch and may be reached through her Twitter handle: @LindaDrattell. Please visit her website: www.LindaDrattell.com.

Ifunanya Georgia Ezeano is an Igbo, Nigerian writer, poet, and editor. She holds a BSc in Psychology. She has her works published in journals and lit mags in many places. She is the head editor for Writers Space Africa Virtual/Video Poetry. She was the pioneer leader of Poets in Nigeria, at the University of Nigeria Nsukka. She is the author of the poetry collection; Naked and Thorns & Petals (on Amazon and other places) and she has other unpublished works. She has a Gazelle (Droplets) coming out on the Konya Shamsrumi Review Gazelle series. She was nominated for the British Loft Prize for flash fiction.

She recently received the Sparks Poetry Award honorary mention from Memorial University, Newfoundland, Canada. She is interested in human experiences, the psychology of life, femininity, and Africanism.

Originally from San Antonio, Texas, Jonathan Fletcher holds a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing in Poetry from Columbia University School of the Arts. He has been published in *Acropolis Journal*, *The Adroit Journal*, *Arts Alive San Antonio*, *The BeZine*, *BigCityLit*, *Book of Matches Literary Journal*, *Catch the Next: Journal of Ideas and Pedagogy*, *Colossus Press*, *Curio Cabinet*, *Door is a Jar*, *DoubleSpeak*, *Emerge Literary Journal*, *Flora Fiction*, *FlowerSong Press*, *fws: a journal of literature & art*, *Half Hour to Kill*, *Heimat Review*, *Hyacinth Review*, *Infrarealista Review*, *LONE STARS*, *Midway Journal*, *The MockingOwl Roost-An Art and Literary Magazine*, *MONO.*, *Moot Point*, *The Muse*, *The Nelligan Review*, *The New Croton Review*, *New Feathers Anthology*, *Old Pal*, *OneBlackBoyLikeThat Review*, *The Opal*, *Open Ceilings*, *Otherwise Engaged Journal: A Literature and Arts Journal*, *The Phare*, *Quibble*, *Rigorous*, *riverSedge: A Journal of Art and Literature*, *Route 7 Review*, *The San Antonio Express-News*, *San Antonio Living*, *San Antonio Public Library*, *Speakeasy*, *Spoonie Press*, *Synkroniciti*, *Tabula rRasa Review*, *The Thing Itself*, *TEJASCOVIDO*, *Unlikely Stories Mark V*, *Vagabond City Literary Journal*, *voicemail poems*, *Voices de la Luna: A Quarterly Literature & Arts Magazine*, *Waco WordFest*, *Whale Road Review*, and *Yearling: A Poetry Journal for Working Writers*. Additionally, his work has been featured by *The League of Women Voters of the San Antonio Area* and at the *Briscoe Western Art Museum* and the *San Antonio Museum of Art*. In 2023, his work was also chosen as a finalist for the *Plentitudes Prize in Poetry*. That same year, his work was also chosen as a finalist for *Synkroniciti's Poetry Prize* for its Issue, "Broken." He has also been nominated for a *Pushcart Prize*. Additionally, he has served as a *Columbia Artist/Teacher* for *New York City's iHOPE*, a specialized school for students with traumatic brain injuries, as well as a poetry editor for *Exchange*, *Columbia University's literary magazine for incarcerated writers and artists*. Currently, he serves as a *Zoeglossia Fellow*.

Joseph P. Garland is a lifelong New Yorker. Professionally, he is a lawyer and in recent years has moved from songwriting to the writing of stories and novels. He has written several novels set in New York's post-Civil War Gilded Age and a novel and novella using characters from *Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice*. In addition, he has written many contemporary pieces, including the one in this issue, set in and around New York City, as well as two contemporary novels.

Edward Hagelstein's short fiction has appeared in *Roi Faineant*, *Mid-Level Management*, *Colp*, *Cowboy Jamboree*, *Black Dandy*, *Thuglit*, *Sterling*, *The Harbinger*, *The Fat City Review*, *Pithead Chapel*, *Sundog Lit*, *Phoebe* and other places. He lives in Georgia, U.S.

Connor Harrison's writing has appeared at *Evergreen Review*, *the LA Review of Books*, *Action*, *Spectacle*, and *Poetry Wales*, among others. Originally from England, he currently lives in Montreal.

Based in Bristol, Tracy Heather Johnson writes short fiction and poetry, and has previously been published in *The Horizon Magazine*, *Myth & Lore Zine*, and was a top ten prize winner in the *Christopher-Asshwell Stones Short Fiction competition 2013*. She regularly performs her work at live readings in Bristol and London, and holds a PhD in English Literature. She is also the host of a new series of interviews on creative practices with some famous names on YouTube, produced by Troy TV.

Ayesha Khan (she/her) is based out of a town in Himachal Pradesh, India. She holds an MA degree in English from *Panjab University, Chandigarh*. Her writing is forthcoming or has been published by *Singapore Unbound*, *Superlative Literary Journal* and others. She works as an Assistant Professor of English Literature.

Helen Kitson lives in Worcester and works part time as a legal secretary. She has published several volumes of poetry, including *'Love Among the Guilty'* (Bloodaxe, 1995) and two novels. After studying for an MA in art history, she decided to concentrate on her work as a visual artist, and her most recent publication is a zine combining her collage artwork with poetry.

DS Maolalai has been described by one editor as "a cosmopolitan poet" and another as "prolific, bordering on incontinent". His work has nominated eleven times for *Best of the Net*, eight for the *Pushcart Prize* and once for the *Forward Prize*, and has been released in three collections; *"Love is Breaking Plates in the Garden"* (Encircle Press, 2016), *"Sad Havoc Among the Birds"* (Turas Press, 2019) and *"Noble Rot"* (Turas Press, 2022).

Paul Marandina is British and lives in Northants, England. He has short stories published in anthologies from @thealienbuddha and @LoftBooks.

Paul previously taught English, Maths and Economics at an independent school and now tutors primary age children. He lives in a harmony of sorts with his wife, dog, four cats and their tortoise.

Paul loves to write whilst drinking copious cups of coffee.

You can find him on Twitter PaulP@BeeRummie and SoundCloud <http://soundcloud.com/user-62051685>

Helena Markovic-Buck is a freelance journalist and editor and has a masters in creative writing at Bath Spa University. She lives in Somerset with her husband and two children. She writes wherever she finds the space - walking in the Mendips, hiding from the noise at home, or scribbling on the backs of discarded arts and crafts.

A winner of the Irish Writers Centre Novel Fair 2023, Jennifer McMahon's work appears in Crannog literary journal, The Irish Independent newspaper (New Irish Writing), the Oxford Prize Anthology (both 2022 and 2023), Heimat Review, Emyrean Literary Magazine, Books Ireland Magazine, Loft Books and the final Retreat West Anthology. She won 2nd place in the Oxford Prize in winter 2023 and also had a second story shortlisted in the competition. In 2022, Jennifer was a top ten finalist in the Oxford Prize. She has won both the Bray Literary Festival and the Books Ireland Magazine flash fiction competitions. Her stories have been shortlisted for the Anthology Short Story Award, the Alpine Fellowship Writing Prize, the Retreat West Prize (short story category), the Fish Publishing Flash Prize, the Wild Atlantic Writing Awards, and the Women On Writing Flash Fiction Prize (twice). Jennifer was also shortlisted for The Literary Consultancy Scholarship in 2022, and was longlisted in the Plaza Prizes Crime First Chapters competition, Fiction Factory's Novel First Chapter competition, and the Retreat West Prize (flash fiction category). She is represented by Brian Langan at Storyline Literary Agency.

Mona Mehas (she/her) writes about growing up poor, accumulating grief, and the climate from the perspective of a retired, disabled teacher in Indiana USA. Her work has appeared in over fifty journals, anthologies, and online museums. Mona's chapbook, 'Questions I Didn't Know I'd Asked,' is available from LJMCD Communications, with another forthcoming in July 2024. She is a Trekkie and enjoys watching Star Trek shows and movies in chronological order. Follow Mona on Twitter @Patience77732097 and <https://linktr.ee/monaiv>. Learn more and sign up for her newsletter at <https://monamehas.net>.

Sarah R. New is in her late 20s, but has been writing since the age of 6. After graduating from university with a BA in Film Studies, she dabbled in screenwriting before returning to fiction writing. Sarah loves to cook and bake, spends most of her time with her cats and is an avid traveller who has visited four continents. Her travel memoir, The Great European Escape: The Trials and Tribulations of Travelling While Chronically Ill, is available for free from <https://sarahrnew.wordpress.com>.

June O'Sullivan lives on an island in Co. Kerry, Ireland. She is currently working on a novel and writes flash fiction and short stories. She is a student of the MA in Creative Writing at the University of Limerick. Her writing has appeared in Seaside Gothic, The Ogham Stone, The York Literary Review, Leicester Writes Anthology, The Storms Journal and The Waxed Lemon.

Bernard Pearson's work appears in many publications, including Aesthetica Magazine, The Edinburgh Review, Crossways, North West Words and FourxFour. In 2017 a selection of his poetry 'In Free Fall' was published by Leaf by Leaf Press. In 2019 he won second prize in the Aurora Prize for Writing for his poem Manor Farm.

Kushal Poddar is the author of 'Postmarked Quarantine' has eight books to his credit. He is a journalist, father, and the editor of 'Words Surfacing'. His works have been translated into twelve languages, published across the globe.

Twitter- <https://twitter.com/Kushalpo>

Deepika Rajagopalan is an educator, writer and sociology enthusiast from Bangalore, India. She identifies as a stream-of-consciousness writer with a taste for the dramatic and the macabre. In her spare time she also dabbles with poetry.

Socials:

Instagram: @coffeeandchronicles

Twitter: @_d33pi

Sarah Roberts is a multidisciplinary, internationally recognized artist and published poet from Waterford, Ireland. She writes a multitude of different topics and styles but is noted for creating hard hitting and powerful pieces by pulling content from her life's experiences and she uses her love of nature to balance this work. To have only emerged last year she feels her current successes to date make for a promising future that she is looking forward to.

Debbie Robson loves to write fiction set in the first sixty years of the last century. She has had stories published in *Serious Flash*, *The Viridian Door*, *Bombay Lit Mag* and others and poetry in *Emerge Journal*, *The Martello Journal*, *The Passionfruit Review* and more. She tweets at [lakelady2282](#).

Peter Ryley is retired from teaching and organising in adult education, and is published in his academic subject of the history of anarchist ideas, and is now having fun writing fiction from his bases in Manchester and rural Greece, where he is currently feeling hot!

Sanjeev Sethi has authored seven books of poetry. His latest is *Wrappings in Bespoke* (The Hedgehog Poetry Press, UK, August 2022). He has been published in over thirty countries. His poems have found a home in more than 400 journals, anthologies, and online literary venues. He edited *Dreich Planet #1*, an anthology for Hybriddreich, Scotland, in December 2022. He is the joint winner of the Full Fat Collection Competition-Deux, organized by Hedgehog Poetry Press, UK. In 2023, he won the First Prize in a Poetry Competition by the prestigious National Defence Academy, Pune. He was recently conferred the 2023 *Setu Award* for Excellence. He lives in Mumbai, India.

Beth Sherman received an MFA in creative writing from Queens College, where she teaches in the English department. Her fiction has been published in *The Portland Review*, *Black Fox Literary Magazine*, *Sandy River Review*, *Blue Lyra Review*, *Fictive Dreams*, *Delmarva Review*, *3Elements Review*, *100 Word Story*, *Rappahannock Review*, *Sou'wester* and elsewhere. She was also nominated for a Pushcart Prize and Best of the Net and has written five mystery novels.

Ellis Shuman is an American-born Israeli author, travel writer, and book reviewer. His writing has appeared in *The Jerusalem Post*, *The Times of Israel*, and *The Huffington Post*. He is the author of *The Virtual Kibbutz*, *Valley of Thracians*, and *The Burgas Affair*. His short fiction has appeared in *Isele Magazine*, *Vagabond*, *The Write Launch*, *Esoterica*, *Ariel Chart*, *Jewish Literary Journal*, and other literary publications. You can find him at <https://ellisshuman.blogspot.com/>
Twitter: @ellisshuman

Andreas Smith lives in County Durham and works as a freelance editor. He has a degree in mathematics and another in philosophy. His stories have been published in a range of UK literary magazines, including *MONK*, *Storgy*, *Idle Ink*, *London Magazine*, and *Shooter Literary Magazine* (his Kafka-inspired story, *Meta-metamorphosis*, won their flash fiction competition). He has also written several novels, for which he is now represented by the David Grossman Literary Agency in London. His novel *National Treasures*, a black comedy set entirely in London's National Gallery, was inspired by the memory of his own experience as a young graduate working for six months as a guard in several London galleries. It is probably the only novel whose heroes are a bunch of anarchic and disaffected art gallery attendants.

Dominic J. Sweeney is from Donegal, Ireland. He was most recently longlisted in the An Cúirt New Writing Prize 2023 and mentored by Grace Wilentz in collaboration with The Gallery Press. He has poetry forthcoming in *The London Magazine*, *Púca Magazine* and recitals with the *Eat The Storms* podcast.

Tom Tumilty is a 71 year-old, retired civil servant, former travel agent and coach tour operator. Tom is an avid reader of crime fiction and has had one other piece of flash fiction published. He is currently working on a detective novel set in Glasgow and the surrounding area. His other writings include 2 articles in his school magazine, a sketch performed at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe and co-authorship of a paper on Rebalancing the Innovation Policy Debate. In his 60s, he wrote and performed stand-up comedy.

Sarah Turner has recently had stories published (or due to be published) by *Welter*, *The London Magazine* online, *Toasted Cheese* and *Paragraph Planet*. She also has an MA in Creative Writing from the University of East Anglia.

Donna Tracy lives in Norwich. Her stories have been published in Mslexia, Litro, Ellipsis Zine, After Dinner Conversation, Literally Stories and Dear Damsels, and have been performed by Liars' League. She is currently working on a historical novel. Twitter: @SlaveofSolitude, Threads: donnatracywriter.

Locus Magazine once called John Weagly "a new writer worth reading and following." His short stories have won various awards. As a playwright, over 100 of his scripts have received over 150 productions on four continents.

Rupa Wood is an award-winning writer and editor-in-chief of the literary review The Vanity Papers. She is the chair of the Harris Manchester Literary Society and is based at The University of Oxford researching cognitive science and the philosophy of time to inform a work of long-form fiction. She is published by several journals including The London Magazine, The Oxford Magazine, Varsity Publications Cambridge and The Oxford Review of Books.

Poetry Prize Winner

What Returns

Sara Collie

Of course there are no guarantees.
Gravity makes its demands just like everything else –
none of us can escape its grasp, some of us
fall and fade too fast, that's just how it is.
The fledgling that appeared on my doorstep
this evening, for example: a frail contortion
of bones and unfinished wings folded strangely
around a single, unseeing eye. Dead already.
Had it fallen? Was it pushed? Did some other bird
pluck it from its nest, discard it by mistake mid-air?
These questions left no space for answers –
the moment was too full, too fragile.
All I could do was scoop the creature up,
part the soil and plant it like a seed, there
where the forget-me-nots were glowing
the same deep shade of blue as the fading sky,
further away than ever. I won't ever see
that dunnock fly, no matter how much I look up.
But what if I look down? What if I watch the earth
instead? Will I notice when it re-emerges, transformed,
in the faces of next year's flowers?

Of course there are no guarantees.

Highly Commended

Ramadan

Ali Ashhar

Over the dark shades of evil
the moon of salvation is spotted,
as we are greeted by the serene
winds of Ramadan,
embraced by a gentle touch
of the breeze from heaven;
we embark on a journey
seeking the service of the Almighty.
The garden of soul braces itself
as it welcomes the spring season;
believers strive to
cultivate the plant of righteousness.
With the passage of time
the leaves of desire start withering;
the flowers of goodness blossom
a flock of pigeons is mesmerized by the view;
subsequently, they visit the garden
and ask the inhabitants:
Where do you find God?
They reply—
on the horizon of goodness
where we fly over through the wings of deed.

The Fountain Awakening

Rupa Wood

After Tagore

Somewhere liquid velvet I am through your fingers sliding
Somewhere you are sliding through dimly shadow gliding
Somewhere you are gliding to my ghost when I am sleeping
Somewhere I am sleeping and we have stopped dividing

We have stopped dividing and returned back to the darkness
Velvet liquid lingers dark in softness limpid hardness
Imagine us dissolved by stars on nights you thought were starless
Imagine us in liquid velvet circulate and scarless

Someplace we are circulate like dust or phosphorescence
Someplace gifts of powder pill white opiates and presents
Someplace hard and concentrate distillate in essence
Someplace we swirl cloud combine a chalk of iridescence

A chalk of iridescence in a sleep rapidly deepening
Dissolving liquid velvet slow, the fountain is awakening
Your body weightless beckoning from shaded sky fast blackening
Awakening my ghost inside the slow fountain velvet happening

Baby Steps in $\frac{3}{4}$ Time

Sara Collie

I stroke the dog's back –
slow – quick – quick,
slow – quick – quick.

His fur dances like a thousand sea anemones
ushering in the morning: neatly unfurling rows
that call the light back.
It will sit all day like a lid
on the surface of things, showing us
where one world ends and the other begins
(impossible to tell, deep down in the darkest depths).

The nearby flames are dancing too,
and you and you and I, we keep
coming up for air,
certain only about the strangeness of time
and the ongoing negotiations of our
slow – quick – quick
waltz within it.

Mirror

Tracy Heather Johnson

In your eyes, I am darkness.
Pure carbon, night queen.
I fell down so far in you
That all the colours went out
And erased what I had been.

Carefully, deliciously,
You peeled away the skin
I had grown hard against the light,
To show me what you see -
Me, pinned limb by limb, under your glass regard.

You, in me, became my mirror.
All the black came not from you
But smeared through, gleaned from me.
I fell down so far in you
That all you could see was me.

Barmouth

Bernard Pearson

On that drive,
When you brought the mountains
to me as an army
rank on rank, in their purple
coats of office.
where the red kites
hovered, like celtic crosses.
then later out from
the darkstone town,
you took me to watch fish
jump in the harbour,
like spanking rain on an old tin roof.
Here the light was so perfect
on the waters of the bay,
that my eyes were crowned by purpose.
While the little specks of happy
wagged their tails and chased nothing
as if it were everything
and the witch black cormorant
arrowed low down the river runway.
Before we left the safety of
that timeless beach,
I looked inland childed
by my memories of such places
to the haunch and sinews
of Cader idris dressed in cloud
at the harvesting of our day.

Aristotle's Wheel

Finola Cahill

We spent the afternoon like we could earn it back
and it is after the lying but before the light switch

that I think our gathered belief in minute, second
year or month holds so little meaning now

I would add another arrow to the clock, a third actor,
moving between noon, pointing at you, and six pm.

These directions could correlate to slow, medium
and quick, and at last I would be the one

who sets the thing. I would be the dancing cog
spinning in place, I would not let the simple

act of propulsion dictate how I frame my day.
If I took the kitchen clock from the wall,

rolled it one full turn towards you along the floor,
the distance travelled would equal its circumference.

But the perfect dome of the black screw that fixes
these never-clapping hands in place? it too completes

one full turn, but the centimetres gained are many
times more than its perimeter edge laid flat. Even

the clock can't keep track of what's supposed to happen
in time and space between its exterior and internal face.

Keys Open Doors

Dominic J. Sweeney

Through formative years
they entered and left many tall buildings.

Each day they developed esteemed qualities.

Handling fine documents
yet
fumbling for their keys.
Carelessly forgotten
lost?

Outside I watch
nod acknowledgements by degree
tirelessly rattling keys
having unlocked many truths
many pains.

Some notice
inspect and marvel at my collection.

If only we could exchange! - they exclaim.

But I'm here? A silhouette
knocking politely
scratching even.

Carving my expression with these keys

A trace they will study
when I leave.

Going Home

Deepika Rajagopalan

Gargoyles and ghouls perch on walls
while the demon loiters on the curbs.
They flip and fidget with their phones
waiting for darkness to fall.
Among them stood I, of reverent gaze
biding her footsteps - my path to grace.

An aura of perfume, a trace of sweat,
Ink stains her palms with labour's fret.
I seek knowledge that can never be known,
I seek to learn the desires of a heart,
that will never be my own.

A swirl of orange skirts and glares,
an edge to her step,
she hurried past me, with purpose in her eyes set.
"Stop." I said. "Where are you going?"
"Home." She said and was on her way again.

Self-Isolation

Ben Banyard

'The first thing that reading teaches us is how to be alone.' - Jonathan Franzen

A strict lock-down,
they say we must stay indoors,
work from home,
keep away from crowds,
social gatherings.

We have food to last us for a few days,
plenty of beer and wine.
But best of all
we have enough novels on our shelves
to nourish us into old age.

One organisation recommended
reading books alone.
Imagine that!
I think I cheered.

We: A Story of My Mother and I

Rebecca Barlowe

I like talking in “we’s”
It started when I was in high school
Immigration took a lot from me
But mostly it took “I”
“I” had to talk for “we”
My mother didn’t know any English
(An immigration story of cliché
for the masses but tragedy for me)
So I talked for her, translated for her,
Slowly I morphed into us
And so, “I” became “we”
Even when she wasn’t with me
I talked in “we’s” & “us”
Still do a decade later
As if we morphed into one.

White Noises

Kushal Poddar

I visit him
in his nursing home
room so white noisy
so calm
and report my whole life.

Every Sunday. And then I repeat.

Every Sunday
you go to your place of worship
confess your sin
in a muffled voice
and ask for the miracles.

And then you repeat.

The Gathering

Sarah Roberts

It was the leaf that caught my eye.
Falling, almost sailing, prematurely ageing.
Perhaps, a little too old for its time.
Waves crashed in the distance,
dressed in crisp white robes,
gracefully rolling on a sea of grey.
Each almost a complete replica
of the soldiers that broke before
marching for peace in silence.
Seagulls circled and screamed above us.
Maybe choking, but certainly mocking
the tranquil space erected for words
to celebrate, remember and heal.
Words inspired by nature.
Yet disturbed by nature.
And then I saw her.
Motionless, perfect, porcelain.
A picture, a painting.
Trapped in time.
Sealed in tradition.
Lost in belief.
But it was the leaf that caught my eye.
Falling, almost sailing, prematurely ageing.
Perhaps a little too old for its time.

Unencumbered

Debbie Robson

I am discombobulated. With
a broken wing. Typing this
one-handed. I can no longer
drive or rush or adhere to time
as I used to. I am managing
without my morning café
coffee and have eschewed
my 50 plus card carrying
hefty purse for a spangly silver
thing left behind at a 1920s party.
I am momentarily unencumbered
from everything that drags us
down in the 2020s - opinions,
expectations, stress. Worrying what
others think, worrying how we look,
constantly taking photos of
how we look. The unremittingness
of it all to the exclusion of so much,
with never a variance. Now I am
varied. Free from constraint, I'm
considering flying into the
sunset when my wing mends.

Of Love and Loss

Tom Tumilty

Ah'm jist no huvvin it, ah've jist hud enough
Ah've nivver felt so disappointit in ma puff
Ah thocht it'd be guid, ah thocht it'd be nice
Ah should really hae listened tae ma mither's advice
Ah needed companionship, a'body could tell
Ah jist wisnae managin, aw by masel
An then you came alang, it wis luv at first sight
You were the answer, ah jist knew it wis right
We'd be cosy thegither, mebbe take a wee nap
Or watch the TV wi your heid in ma lap
Jist you an' me to help fill up the hoose
Bit ma Goad whit it turned oot that ah hud let loose
Ye treated the place like it wis a hotel
Onything needed done, ah'd tae dae it masel
Ah said tae masel this is nae wey tae live
Fae your point o' view it wis aw take an' no give
Ah jist coudnae pit up wi' the wey you'd behave
Ah wisnae a hoose mate, ah felt like your slave
But it's finished, it's done wae, it's ower, that's that
Whitever possessed me
Tae git me a cat.

Beyond the Virtual and Real

Ali Ashhar

I was a nascent poet
having a virtual rendezvous with
my charismatic muse upfront
who initially came to know her persona
as the editor of a litmag.
The distance of million miles
faded with her aura,
camaraderie has witnessed million eras in a
billion ways and billions stories;
this one gets portable with the technology—
the cell phone screen narrates
umpteenth tales from other side of the sea,
the shores around the Instagram timeline
would have a rendezvous with her radiant smile
serenading a splendiferous sonnet
and dancing through the abyss.
In the sea of her eyes a mystic storm undulates
beyond the virtual and real
between what is subtly said
and what is implicitly heard—
the bard's scribe
kept decoding it all the day long.

Your Dog and My Memory

DS Maolalai

Tonight you are gone
to the movies with friends
and the dog is asleep
on the sofa beside me.
she's your dog, and my memory
of you while you're gone
to the movies, or dinner,
or for drinks with Iliana
and Kevin or any
where – wherever
you go; I don't mind.

At the Bourse

Sanjeev Sethi

For the uninitiated:
the original investor
continues to receive dividends,
if the new buyer
doesn't transfer the title.

I want
to be such a share,
for you.

Flash Fiction Winner

The Pattern of Her

Christine Collinson

She weaves her hand across the folds, satin soft as youthful skin. The dress, hanging in the shadows of her brimming wardrobe. A barely yellow that she'd chosen, and he'd teased was simply cream. She'd smiled, then. Had adored such shared moments, the meaningless disagreements. "Next time I'll pick one as bright as buttercups, dear," and he'd grinned in return.

Her breath rucks, gathering in the silence of pain. The hem, now repaired, had frayed at the back where it snagged in a hinge. Climbing out of a carriage, his arm outstretched to help her. The first time their ways had crossed. "Careful as you go." His image sewn into her mind, she, determined to keep it. Faded splashes of deep Spanish wine at the neckline. Laughing together on a summer evening in the garden, her glass had spilled. Only irritable for as long as he'd taken to dab at the stain. Fingertips impulsively traced her shape, lower then lower. He'd found the desire trapped beneath the cloth and released it.

White lace on the cuffs, looping and linking, like endless daily choices for good or ill. He'd never been one to dwell on the poor ones, unlike her. Exquisitely crafted, brought back from a Spring trip to Florence. The warmth of his lips on hers when she thanked him. "I'll make sure to use it all."

She tries to stand tall in her black gown. Its drapes will absorb infinite tears, embellish fresh sorrow, encase a cleaved heart. The thread of her pulse is weakened. This, the pattern of her now.

Her father is at the door like a dark statue, not a beard-hair out of place. Gently, "Caroline, it's time to leave."

As the stitches loosen, she wonders if it's worth trying to save them. An unravelling that no one can alter. Forever, or even just for today; the cusp of goodbye.

One distant morning, when dawn spreads its luminous patchwork, she'll stand before the wardrobe to choose a dress again.

Highly Commended

My Sister Goes to Mars

Jonathan Fletcher

Though it takes only seconds, your step onto the reddish, rocky surface has been years in the making—valedictorian at Mount Sacred Heart, summa cum laude from Smith in Engineering, a Master of Science in Aeronautics and Astronautics from MIT within a single academic year, top student of NASA’s Astronaut Candidate Class. However, as I watch you plant your foot on Mars, which—because of the delay in transmission—already happened twenty minutes ago, I see not the consistently high achieving student and ambitious professional, but instead the loving older sibling with whom I used to walk beside the railroad at Zarzamora and Merida, placing pennies on the tracks in the peak of summer. After the trains ran them over, we’d let the hot metal cool, then save the flattened copper as souvenirs—much cheaper, though admittedly far riskier, than the penny press machines we never got to use as kids.

“¡Qué pérdida!” our mother would say, tugging us away from the manually operated tourist traps.

“Es solo un dolar,” you and I pleaded in unison. “Por favor, mamá!”

Had our mother known that we got our pennies flattened anyway (and the dangerous method by which we did), I’m sure she would’ve happily spared us two dollars. But she would’ve also told our disciplinarian of a father, who would’ve chided us for us for our foolishness: “¡Qué estaban pensando!” Consequently, we never admitted to our early, technically illegal adventure.

Now I’m wondering whether you managed to stow away my penny in your suit—the penny I gave you for good luck the evening before you left Earth, the penny you promised to try to sneak into your spacesuit, the penny you would place on the Red Planet’s weathered rock if you could. Though unflattened, it’s my favorite coin from the ones I found on the traintracks: a 1962 D Penny. Considered rare, it’s been listed for over \$2,400 dollars on Google, but on the high end of the valuations. Of course, any penny that fetches that amount of money is undoubtedly in mint condition. Though the coin I gifted you has a few scratches, it thankfully bears no corrosion stains. Had I known what it was worth when we were children, I still doubt I would’ve told our parents. Yes, we needed the money. But you and I needed luck. If your journey to Mars is any indication, I think that keeping the special coin paid off. I think so as I watch you plant your booted feet atop the rocky surface. I think so as I hear your voice—a little staticky yet audible, millions of miles away yet unmistakably familiar—speaking in the language of our parents.

The Sandcastle

Ellis Shuman

Black flags lined the shore, but we had no intention of going into the sea. Instead, we had plans to build a sandcastle, the biggest sandcastle on the Tel Aviv beach.

"Bring me more water," three-year-old Noa commanded me. "And then shells, more shells."

I picked up the orange bucket and went into the surf. As I bent over, I kept my eyes on my granddaughter, making sure she remained in the safety of the shaded area near the plastic beach chairs I'd rented. I stood up, adjusted my cap, and made my way back to her.

"Look, a tower!"

"Let's make it even bigger," I said, dropping to my knees on the cool sand.

"And show it to Imma!"

"We'll show it to Imma," I said, even though this was a promise I couldn't keep.

"Saba, does Imma like the beach?"

"Of course, she likes the beach."

"Then why didn't she come with us?"

"Because she's in the hospital, Noa. You know that."

"I know that. But why can't she come?"

And just like that, Noa's burst into tears, as unexpectedly as seeing the puffy cloud overhead suddenly obstruct the morning Mediterranean sun.

"She'll come one day, but I can tell you she'll be really happy to see our sandcastle. Should I take a picture of it?" I took my phone out of the beach bag and prepared to take the shot.

"And then can we get ice cream?" Her tears dried up quickly, and the cloud blew off to the west.

"Sure! What kind do you like? Chocolate?"

"Can I get sprinkles on top?"

"Colored sprinkles?"

"Those taste the best!"

Later, as we leaned back in our chairs licking our refreshing snack, I gazed out to sea. Who was in that sailboat far off in the distance? What would it be like to balance on a standup paddleboard like those teenagers battling the cresting waves? I admired the long, tanned limbs of the exercise walkers striding up and down the shore, missing the years when I could match their pace.

"Does Imma like ice cream?"

"Everyone likes ice cream," I said, turning my attention back to Noa. Chocolate was dripping from her chin onto the unicorns of her bathing suit, a bathing suit that I had struggled to dress her in.

"Can we take some to Imma?"

"When she's better, she'll get all the ice cream she wants."

"When she's better," Noa repeated, and I was sure she was about to burst into tears again. But no. "Saba, look at that dog! He's going into the water. Doesn't he know there are black flags? No one can go into the sea when there are black flags!"

At our feet, the sandcastle melted into my memories of that lovely day.

Come November

Jennifer McMahan

November comes in brisk winds and sniff of rain, novenas for the month of the Holy Souls, Mother's beads rattling in the living room, knees raw from all the prayers she's sending up to Our Lady and the whole communion of saints, Lord, save him, Mary, guard him. Mikey hears it every evening when he comes in from the cattle, boots near falling off him, the tea cold on the table because he couldn't bear to come in and eat with her, and she couldn't bear to call him. Stack of envelopes on the table, appointments for this ologist and that one, scans and examinations to find out what they already knew a long time ago. He saw it in Dr. Cullinan's eyes, last time he was up in the city, and the handshake he gave in parting was the sort you'd get at a funeral, or after losing a match.

Mikey's name was called from the pulpit, and the nuns away in the convent were hoarse from telling God what a good man he was, how he'd nearly won the local final one year all on his own, sure if they'd only fielded Mikey and let the rest of lads have a rest, they'd still have won. A fierce player in his day, and then his day was over and his father was gone and the farm was his. Why God, the nuns said, would you take a good man when there's bastards in the city who can't speak your name for fear of bursting into flames? Mother told him so, when she came back from them, and he knew she didn't doubt for a second that God would sweep out of the heavens to put a healing on him, a grand miracle for the boys in the Vatican. She'd have him a saint, if she had her way.

The evening's dark, the natural turning of things. He creeps up the stairs, the way she won't hear him. Up to his room to lie on his bed and listen to the wind drawing a whistle from the gutters, the rattle of the milking parlour's door making the beat, and Mother's intonations setting the undertone. After a while, the television goes on. A girl's voice comes up loud. Mikey presses his ear to his pillow, and listens to the weak thrumming of his heart. He'll disappoint them all with his death, and test their faith until it breaks, but every farmer knows that's how it is with the turning of the seasons, the comings and the goings, the cutting back and giving in, letting go and letting be. Come November next year, they'll find their faith renewed. Come November next year, with brisk winds and sniff of rain and novenas for the Holy Souls, he'll be gone.

Erosion

Donna Tracy

We drive up the narrow lane until we reach the signs telling us to stop. There are a couple of places carved out at the side of the road where people have obviously parked before, and you pull into one of them. We get out and make our way towards the cliff edge, only a couple of hundred metres away, you, striding off ahead, the way you do, as if you're leading a group hike.

We can't get that close because they've put up a barrier. It's made of ugly orange plastic that flaps angrily in the wind as if it's trying to free itself. We stand behind it, straining forward to see the beach below.

'Jesus,' you say.

This is where we came on our honeymoon, thirty-seven years ago. We had a little caravan up here on the clifftop, though it would have been much further out than where we're standing now. We'd thought the place was called 'Happysburg,' and we laughed about that, thought it apt. It wasn't until years later we realised it was pronounced 'Hazebruh.' There had been a dozen or more houses here then, and a teashop, all gone now. All fallen into the sea.

We stare out at the water, saying nothing. I think about taking your hand.

'There was another village here once,' you say. 'It was called Whimpwell.'

I nod.

'Apparently, in 1845, they drilled a twelve-acre field with wheat – that would have meant an awful lot of work back then, without tractors and such – but a gale raged all night, and next morning the field had disappeared.' You shake your head. 'All that work.'

I frown. 'Mm.'

You turn to me. 'Linda—'

'It's so breezy up here!' I say brightly. 'Really blows the cobwebs away.'

You stop, frown. 'Mm.'

'I was thinking, we could get some bits from the deli in town,' I suggest, 'have a little picnic.'

You nod, look away to the sea again.

I imagine all the good things the deli will sell: cheeses, chutney, a thick slab of pork pie, apple juice in a green glass bottle, and I feel comforted. 'Lucky I thought to bring the blanket.'

You don't reply, only stare out at the water.

'Robert—'

'They've tried everything,' you say. 'Levelling the dunes, erecting groynes, sea walls. They even tried sinking old ships along the coast to form a barrier. That didn't work though, it was too hazardous to other ships. They've got these now,' and you gesture at the huge wooden defences jutting out of the sand below, like upturned tables. 'They've shored it up a bit, but they won't work forever.' You run your hands through your thinning hair, squeeze your eyes shut.

I stare out at the sea to where the long-drowned village must be and imagine the remains of farms and fields, houses, a church, lying silent, blue-grey, beneath the surface, like forgotten memories.

'This time next year,' you say, 'I reckon all this will be gone.'

Extra Sharp Divination

John Weagly

I held a moldy slice of cheese out to Maggie Anne. “I thought we were throwing this out?”

“Put it back!” She said, panic in her voice.

We were in the storeroom of the diner I own and operate, Buster’s Lunch Box. I was grabbing some onions and called Maggie Anne back upon my discovery.

Three slices of old cheddar were sitting on a shelf by themselves. Each had a small post-it note attached with a name written on it – Brett, Joshua, Tommy. I’d picked up Joshua to make my inquiry. Hearing the alarm in her tone, I put the slice back with the others.

“These were past their prime two days ago,” I said. “Now they’re turning green. Why didn’t you get rid of them?”

“Joshua has mold on him?” Maggie Anne asked.

“Yes.”

“What about the other two? Are they growing mold?”

I looked at the other two slices. The pungent aroma of over-ripe cheddar crawled into my nose. “No.

Nothing yet.”

Maggie Anne looked crestfallen. “Okay.”

Maggie Anne Carlisle is my right-hand woman, she runs the restaurant when I’m not there and oftentimes even when I am. She’s a twenty-something headstrong brunette who knows how to handle every customer in every situation. She also sometimes has strange notions.

“What’s the deal with the fungus garden?” I asked.

“Three guys asked me out for this weekend. I put their names on the cheese. The slice that grew mold first is supposed to be my best bet.”

“Is this one of those fortune telling things you like to do?”

Maggie Anne looked frustrated with my lack of knowledge. “It’s called tyromancy.”

“I see.” I didn’t.

“You can also answer questions with the number of holes in Swiss, and how curds form. This seemed like the most direct option for my dilemma.”

Most of the weird stuff Maggie Anne was into I’d heard of, telling the future with dairy products I had not. “So, Joshua’s the lucky guy. Can we throw these out before we get a visit from the health inspector?”

“Sure,” Maggie Anne said, not seeming to care. She walked to the front of the diner, shoulders slumped.

I thought I knew what was wrong. Joshua Beaston wasn’t exactly a catch. He acted aloof around people, like he was too good to participate in whatever conversation was going on around him. A lot of people thought he was a stuck-up jerk.

Brett and Tommy were both fun and engaging, much better possibilities.

As soon as I saw Maggie Anne settle behind our cash register, I worked some of my own tyromantic magic.

“Hey!” I called out.

“What?” Maggie Anne answered.

I carried a slice of cheese out to her, happy we didn't have any customers at the moment to see the greenish-white lactose lumps. “I made a mistake,” I said, my hand itching to be washed. “Brett's the one that got moldy.”

Maggie Anne's eyes lit up.

If it worked out they'd better invite me to the wedding.

Fish Out of Water

Laura Cooney

It was the day Goldie died that Matilda Arnold wept an ocean of tears, not because of the fish, you understand, fish die don't they? Fish even die of suicide, which happens way more often than you'd realise. No, Matilda wept because it was also the day that her mother melted.

Whipsnade Zoo 1965: and one Mavis Arnold, had the job of Chief Ape Love Facilitator. She was a champion of animal conservation and had notoriously been awarded an OBE for her 'selfless' services to nature. It had to be said that Mavis did great many humanitarian things in her life, travelling round the world. Rumour had it, she got up to occasional monkey business in the line of duty, and that she was often bored when she was at home.

After retirement she became the chief ribbon cutter of every "*Go Ape!*" centre in the Midlands, a job she took very seriously, and her crowning achievement was finding her way into the Piccadilly branch of Madame Taussads where, until yesterday, for reasons and means no-one could figure out, seven models had melted to the ground, of which Mavis was one.

Speculation followed. Why would someone melt the effigy of the world renowned conservationist? How could it have been done with absolutely no evidence? And, why now, after all these years?

Matilda had listened attentively to the firemen and their explanations as she stood in the 'museum' looking at her mother's legacy hardening into a solid puddle. And, afterwards, when she ate in London's only branch of Taco Bell, she wondered what all the fuss was about, it was only a wax model, surely there was more to her mother's legacy and it wasn't like the whole place had gone up in flames.

And later again when she'd stood in the kitchen, staring disbelievingly, at the hardened carcass of the goldfish the tears finally welled up in her eyes. She felt, then, the ephemeral nature of life. With a sharp flashing pain to the ribs, she felt she'd wasted hers. Inside she berated her mother for her lack of encouragement knowing that because she had been too busy aping around the world to give her any attention she could never aspire to be more than she was, a secretary at the local fire station. She sniffed. Pull yourself together Mats she thought, if you're going to get away with this, you'll need to keep your head. And as she put the matches back into the drawer most of the guilt went with them. Though, admittedly, she would always be slightly sorry for the six other people she'd affected... especially Elvis. Empathy, she supposed, was something you have to work at, way more often than people realise.

The Yellow Tree

J.P. Garland

When I was young, my folks rented a house for a week up in the country. I loved going up, my break from the city. It was a smallish house a bit in the woods. We'd pack our Chevy and my dad told his stories and my mom smiled back at us to just let him go on.

The house was off a side road near town with a long, tree-lined drive.

I discovered it on Airbnb. I was feeling nostalgic in early June. I hadn't been to the house since I was seventeen. The pictures showed the small structure as I remembered it, but the inside was far different. Modern. Efficient. Comfortable. I booked it for a week in September. My wife, Rachel, thought it a grand idea.

As we headed up, the grandkids sat in back with their phones, paying no attention to the passing countryside—they and their mom being the only positive products of my first marriage—as I told Rachel the story.

It wasn't much of a "story," of course, except to me. About that last trip to the house. How there was this girl from Boston who was with her family in the cabin next door. You got to it through a path that zigged and zagged through the small wood that divided the properties. Its trees lined the left side of our drive.

She was my age and also there for the week. Her first time.

"There was a gap in the trees," I told Rachel. We were maybe ten minutes from the house, and she was driving, and my stomach was getting weird at the sudden, long-forgotten memory.

"She caught me staring and ran through the trees and when she got close she stuck out her hand and said, 'Hi, I'm Amy but my friends call me "A" so call me "A."'"

"I of course took her hand and shook it and somehow just like that we were friends."

"Are you telling one of your bor.....ing stories?" came from the back seat, Jess's phone having been put, slightly, to the side.

I looked back. "Someday you'll have your own bor.....ing stories you know."

"Not as bor.....ing as yours" shot back, and Rachel grasped my hand on the center console. "You'll never win with her you know."

"I know," and Jess gave her best I-won-that-round smile and returned to her phone.

"It was my first kiss. A couple of days after we met. We'd gone into town and were coming back. She pulled me to the side of the drive and behind one of the trees and kissed me."

"And?"

"It was one of the nicest things that ever happened to me and I think I swooned. We didn't do anything else. Just kiss."

I was lost in the memory. *Whatever became of A?*

Rachel squeezed my hand.

"Was it the *best* kiss?"

"Other than with you, it might have been," I said, which was true.

As we drove up the drive, I wondered if I'd remember which tree. The leaves were turning. The drive was a cascade of dull oranges and browns. Except for one tree. Its leaves were yellow.

The Appointment

Linda Drattell

The doctor requested I make a follow-up appointment for today, and I made one for nine o'clock this morning. I set out in my Toyota Tacoma, the one that's easy to find in a parking lot because of the paint peeling from the roof and the horse and goat stickers on the rear window, confident I will make it to the appointment in plenty of time. The drive takes about forty-five minutes, but I'm giving myself an hour to get there. You never know, rush hour traffic and whatnot. Also, I like to give myself time to grab a cup of coffee near the doctor's office, which lays like an odd egg among the golden nest of boutique stores.

As I set out from my home, I think about the direction I'd be driving. The appointment is in the posh area of Walnut Creek. Actually, the whole town is posh—wide streets, beautiful architecture, places to shop for upscale things, places to eat upscale food. Driving to my appointment means I will pass an outdoor mall with shops named Nordstrom and Eileen Fisher and Neiman Marcus emblazoned on them, where they sell designer purses and designer clothes and designer shoes. I don't have many places to go where I would wear these things, they would just sit in my closet, take up valuable space I need for my jeans and sweatshirts and tees that project various philosophies about making love, not eating meat, saluting various female athletes as "Greatest of All Time." Quite frankly, I'd rather not be tempted by merchandise secured in the store by chains and watched over by security guards. They remind me I should be earning more money, should be moving up faster in the world. Working for a nonprofit, I've found there's only so much you can move up; you're stuck in an unmovable salary range. I tend to drive past these stores very fast, find myself exhaling harshly, realize my breath feels very hot.

I thought a lot about the direction I'd be driving this morning and, instead of heading west on I-580 toward Walnut Creek, I find myself heading east away from the city. I pass grassy hills and cows munching lazily, wave past small towns, rodeo arenas, horse farms, and places to buy baby chickens to raise for food or eggs or just keep as pets. My Tacoma feels more at home in these surroundings. Maybe that's a projection. The openness of the hills calls to me; it is in sync with my well-being, my aspirations, what makes me happy.

I don't consider who lives in the towns I pass or what they are passionate about, and if they are passionate about the same things that I am passionate about. Who knows, perhaps they wish they had a reason to drive west while I'm driving east. Perhaps they wish they had a reason to shop at that outdoor shopping mall, you never know. I don't really think about it, I just think about the fact that I should be driving forty-five minutes to my doctor's office and instead have chosen to drive forty-five minutes away from the doctor's office, but it's the effort that counts, isn't it? I'm supposed to drive for forty-five minutes and I'm doing that. That must count for something.

I'm enjoying the spacious sky, the undeveloped land between the small towns, the extended length between highway exits, and am reminded of video games which show avatars riding mythical beasts in lands without fences or stop signs or notices nailed on trees that warn, "Private Property." I've come to a place where I have freedom of movement in a place of no other movement; even the cows are all standing quietly, chewing their cud, as if waiting to see where I'll end up. The possibilities are endless. After about forty-five minutes, I get off the freeway and stop at a restaurant that has been advertised for the past ten miles: "Ten to go!" "Eight to go!" "Next exit for fresh coffee and breakfast!" I get out of my car, breathe in the country air, the dust, the flowers, the grass, the cow manure, all of it; I'm inhaling freedom. The sun beats warmly upon my truck, which is now in need of unleaded gas, not premium or anything fancy. I enter the restaurant and order a cup of coffee.

When the doctor's office calls me on my cell phone at fifteen minutes past nine o'clock and asks, "Why aren't you here?" I answer, "Because I'm HERE. I've driven the requisite forty-five minutes, and I've ARRIVED."

Venus

Sarah New

When I was 20 years old, I went to Paris for the first time. The city captivated me, and my friend and I ended the trip with a visit to the Louvre. We were young arts students, and we wanted to feel cultured and sophisticated.

We wandered around the museum for hours, marvelling at the art, when we arrived at the Venus de Milo. We stopped there, staring at her, feeling self-conscious in our ogling.

“She is beautiful.” My friend murmured, and I agreed, although I never quite felt what I think she was feeling.

I never really understood love or desire in my youth. A devotee of myths and legends, I felt drawn to Athena and Artemis, but never Aphrodite. I didn't have a use for her. I didn't understand her. Athena's indifference and Artemis's avoidance I could logically recognise, but Aphrodite's flair and passion seemed completely alien to me. I couldn't imagine feeling so strongly for someone that I would take the world to war, or rip the world asunder.

As I grew up I expected to feel these things. When people asked who my crush was in secondary school, I would make something up. I would feel completely alien to the groups of girls gushing over attractive men. And I kept waiting and waiting for those feelings to appear, but they just didn't. I couldn't explain to anyone what was wrong, because I wasn't sure anything was wrong. I just had something missing. I was broken. Aphrodite had forsaken me.

It wasn't until my mid-twenties that I found out what asexuality was, and realised that I was probably what I was, and that I wasn't broken. I had never been broken. And I started to understand it, and accept it as part of me, and I didn't feel weird about my lack of attraction. I hadn't been cast from Olympus. I hadn't been forsaken. I was just different.

When I was 28 years old, I went travelling around Europe. I went to Florence, and Budapest, and I ended my trip in Paris, in the Louvre, with Venus again. And it was like I saw her for the very first time. As I looked at her, she seemed to look into me, and I felt calm. It felt right. Aphrodite had accepted me.

Hexapods

Norah Blakedon

Hattie chose a starless night to soar, despite wanting so long to fly. Had she held off until tonight, she'd have flown towards a creamy crescent, a manicured nail tip gleaming from an inky veil. Maybe she couldn't hang on for the stars to shine. Regardless, I knew she'd uncurled, revealing lacy wings, a powdered moth.

She hated her black eyes. Insect-like, she'd say. Iridescent like a beetle shell, I'd counter. Such an ugly profile! Proud as a mantis, I'd argue. Legs as thin as a stick insect! A pond skater, long and graceful. Hattie never ventured from her cocoon long enough to see her beauty, seldom escaping its confines as she aged. Under the sun, her tears shone like diamonds, her hair a wild horse's mane, her rare laughter borrowed from an angel.

Sometimes, I'd sneak into her cocoon and bind her with my silk, but her teeth, sharp as pincers, slashed through my promises of brighter days. Instead, she floundered in a husk of sorrow, dark thoughts for company.

But last week, she soared.

And I search everywhere for iridescent eyes and lacy wings.

Busted

Georgia Ifunanya Ezeano

Nene laid down and covered herself with bamboo leaves making a heap in front of the bamboo tree, breathing softly in order not to be noticed. Earlier, her friend, Ese, told her that her husband comes home late because he is indulging in roadside adultery with a woman with a big bum at the bamboo bar every evening.

"We have stayed here for two hours, Let's go back to our witches at home before they feast on us," Tega said, They laughed heartily. They stood up and placed their empty bottles of palm wine under the chair. They pulled out their penises and urinated on the heap of leaves in front of the bamboo tree, whistling.

"My wife sent her friend, Ese, with big buttocks to seduce me but I said no. But if she sets me up with a jar of this sweet palm wine, I will fall for it," they laughed thunderously and said their goodbyes.

Three Good Reasons

Beth Sherman

One, he was cheap. Two, he didn't read. And three, the sex was mediocre. Still, she couldn't decide how to go about it. They'd been living together for a year – long enough to think of themselves as a committed couple, comfortable enough that they didn't have to keep a conversation going.

She cooked a special dinner, Southwestern Vegetable Medley, involving hours of chopping and dicing.

"This is good," he said, taking a second helping.

She noticed bits of cauliflower in his moustache but didn't tell him to wipe it off.

"So . . ." she said. "I've been thinking about us."

His eyes flicked open a notch in surprise. Dinner was a time for sharing stories about their respective workplaces, for trading humorous anecdotes and bolstering each other's self-esteem. They rarely talked about their relationship, never while eating.

"We seem to be at a crossroads," she said.

She'd practiced this line in front of the bathroom mirror, noticing the way her forehead scrunched with concern, wondering if she'd be able to keep the Vitamix blender they'd bought together at Costco. It was expensive.

"What?" He looked genuinely confused and for this she was sorry. Directness had never been one of her strong suits.

"I've been thinking we should probably break up."

He was wearing the plaid shirt she liked. His hair smelled of almonds.

He reached for another piece of bread. "Okay."

It felt like he'd punched her in the eye. "What do you mean okay?"

"You're right. This isn't working," he said, continuing to shovel forkfuls of the meal she'd cooked into his mouth.

"Are you seeing someone else?" she asked, hating the neediness in her voice.

"No."

"What's not working for you?"

He shrugged, pushed his chair back from the table. "I dunno."

She followed him into the bedroom, watched him take a suitcase from the closet and fill it with clothes.

"You don't have to go this minute," she said weakly.

"There's no point in dragging things out."

As she helped him empty drawers and clean out the medicine cabinet, resentment simmered in her bones. If she was the one ending the relationship, why did it feel like she was getting dumped?

"What if I hadn't said anything? Would you have stayed with me even though you're unhappy?"

"Maybe."

"Why?"

She was genuinely curious.

“Out of laziness, I guess. I can’t stand change.”

She held the front door open for him, her heart bumping around in her chest. They seemed to have run out of words.

Afterwards, she poured the vegetables into the blender to make soup and washed their plates and forks.

To erase the smell of him she put an essential oil called Peppermint Dreams into the diffuser. Then she sat in front of the TV without turning it on.

One, she was alone now. Two, no one loved her. Three, the quiet held a vaguely soothing promise of something she couldn’t name.

Short Story Winner

Softly & Suddenly

Michael Daviot

If there was a Book of Life, he thought – or should that be ‘if there were’? Anyway, a Book of Life with neatly printed columns of crisp print running down the middle of spotless, perfectly cut pages; if there were such a thing – ‘were’ did sound better – his messy little life would be scribbled in the margins in pencil, and the writing would be so rubbed and smudged that it would be all but illegible. His pages, if he had any of his own, would be dog-eared, foxed, and spotted with mysterious stains. Yes, his life was a mysterious, irritating stain on the pages of the Book of Life, a stain that partially obscured the interesting bits and had faded to a colour so vague as to have no name. A faded stain. How had this happened? How had he become so... inconsequential?

It may have begun when he became a teenager. Certainly it had been a long, slow, gradual process. The move to secondary school, perhaps. So hard to know when he remembered almost nothing of his young self. The jolt into sudden pressure to be ‘grown up’. The struggle with his rebellious, changing body combined with the new urgent demands made upon him. There had, perhaps, been a slight slippage at that time. A slippage of soul. He never quite managed to adapt his inner self to his outer, as it changed, so that the one could fully inhabit the other. More and more he – his self – felt left adrift, out of step with the burgeoning physical him that was being forced to take its place in the world.

The slippage soon became something more – a disconnection, an absence from his immediate surroundings, a feeling of not being entirely in his body. Sometimes, especially during exams at school, to which he could attach no importance at all, he had the sensation of leaving his body and its immediate surroundings altogether. The stale, stuffy air of the exam hall (really the school gym), baked dry by huge Mesozoic cast iron radiators, the pitiless artificial light produced by long, white fluorescent tubes, which hung flimsily from the high ceiling, combined with the snowy blanks of the sheets of paper that he had been told he must fill over the next two hours with useless facts that he had been coerced into learning in order to secure a future he could not see and did not want; all these combined to induce in him a state akin to self-hypnosis. His eyes grew heavy, his head and body followed, his spirit fled the place of torture, and his earthly shell flopped forward to ‘sleep’ on top of the unanswered questions scattered across his desk.

But, at these times he was no more asleep in the accepted meaning of the word than he was at night. He was being otherwise. He had gone out, he was travelling. Often, he was flying. Not above the rows of desks of hard-pressed boys, not above the gym or over the school, but flying through a glorious abstract space, composed entirely of light and colour and air – and freedom. All too soon the rude awakening would come – a rap on the knuckles, a slap to the back of the head, and the torture of trying to be present, alert, there in the material world, would continue. At night, of course, for a few blissful hours he could be truly free, in the so-called land of dreams. But this was the real world. This was where he belonged, where he felt fully alive. Here he flew and glided and drifted, swooped and soared to his heart’s content, only coming down to earth again when his body received its morning summons to resume its place in the daytime world of things and tests, demands and expectations.

Later, as his body developed ever more insistent instincts and needs of its own, he became more trapped, more tangled up with the demands of the physical self. When the time arrived for teenage parties, he seemed always to be lost, forever walking unfamiliar streets searching for houses full of young people that he didn’t really want to be with in order to have embarrassed, unfulfilled encounters of an inexpertly sexual nature that merely left him confused. At night, he didn’t always fly now, but spent much anxious time seeing boats he was meant to be on leaving harbours and buses he had to catch pulling away from stops just before he got there. Or he was frantically running through impossible Piranesian labyrinths of tunnels and platforms and escalators to get trains he always missed.

The confusion and disconnection only worsened when the mating imperative took full charge of members and emotions. There would be long periods of time, sometimes years, when the body was

totally in command and indulged itself enthusiastically and frequently. But there would also be substantial intervals when the inner self, the immaterial self, finding the whole business messy and crude, rebelled and denied the body's clamourings, reducing them to quiescence. In the words of the unavoidable cliché, these were Jekyll and Hyde phases, atavistic indulgence alternating with ascetic disgust.

Somehow, he got a job he didn't want, he got a flat he didn't want, he got a wife he didn't want. That's not fair; he got a wife whose inner self he knew and loved, but whose constant presence made him feel even more earthbound, even more trapped. Anyone's constant presence would have made him feel that way; it had nothing to do with the individual. He was, of course, no good at being married. It wouldn't last.

He continued to fly at night, but less and less as the years passed and more fitfully, increasingly unable to remain aloft for more than the very briefest of flights. The complete freedom of flight that his night life had brought for so long was gradually replaced by episodes of claustrophobic entrapment. And when he did fly, it was no longer through gorgeous, abstract infinitudes, but in defined spaces with ceiling and walls that hemmed him in, and with people on the ground who were forever shouting up to him that he must come down and be with them, be like them. But more often now, instead of flying he would be wandering aimlessly through the huge rooms and corridors of a vast multi-storied ruinous house, climbing higher and higher up staircases that grew narrower and narrower until, turning a corner, he became wedged between walls that had grown too close together and was stuck fast, unable to go forward or back. Then, at last, the night flights stopped altogether. The material world had caught him. The relentless demands of that material world hedged him about in daylight and darkness. Body and brain went about their repetitive mundane tasks – working, eating, socializing, sleeping etc., ad nauseam – while the undernourished spirit remained trapped in that narrow stone staircase. Unable to escape the solid stonework - unable to escape the solid world - the inner self came to dread the nightworld: held fast in the flightless dark, watching powerlessly as images of anxiety and panic swarmed and trooped, endlessly mocking, through the long dark hours. His teeth crumbled and filled his mouth with bone dust, or they became so loose that he must spit them out; they grew too large for his mouth, causing his jaws to snag on each other and lock together, so that he could neither speak nor eat; fillings fell out en masse, leaving him with a mouth full of snaggy stumps. His hair came out in great clumps when brushed and combed. It hung loosely about his head, growing on a wide flap of skin which was only attached to his skull at the back of his head; this flap constantly lifted up, as though caught by a puff of wind, to reveal the raw-boned dome of the top of his skull. Awake and asleep, he was trapped.

If he was going to survive in any fashion at all, he must reclaim freedom for the inner him. For that to be possible, he must do two things. The first was to keep the bodily self as much as possible away from other people. This would enable him to do the second. By giving more and more time to entering the abstract world of music or burrowing into the wordscapes of stories and novels which replicated the conditions of his night life he would help the spirit self to wander uninhibited again through long-denied regions of imagination. While he remained imprisoned in the material world it was only in the imagination that the inner self could be free. How was he to recover the absolute freedom that life had taken from him? But these would be invaluable steps towards complete emancipation.

He must disengage. He must remove the physical self from the cage of actions and appetites. He must withdraw all presence, all impact of the material self from its surroundings. He must tread lightly, he must make no noise, cause no disturbance, make no impression at all in the day world. He must efface that self so thoroughly that it became weightless, invisible. As a child he had fallen under the spell of *The Hunting of the Snark*; one line, about the fate of the Baker, had fascinated him more than all the rest. It did still: 'He had softly and suddenly vanished away.' Ever since then, that had been what he most wanted to do.

And now he set about making it possible more determinedly than ever before. He stopped going to work. He stopped going out socially. As firmly but kindly as he could, he purged his life of others. He removed himself from social media and deleted his email account. No one had phoned him other than commercially or opportunistically for so long that throwing his mobile phone into the maw of a garbage truck was almost redundant. But it felt good. He cancelled all deliveries of food and drink and essentials. He went out for walks only after dark and even then to places where others would not be walking at night. Hills and woodlands and hidden pathways where his only company was nestling, scampering and snuffling things that set branches and undergrowth rustling. These nocturnal adventurings also worked their magic on his sleep world.

He started to fly again. And to fly in a way he hadn't since childhood. There were no more confining ceilings and walls; a mere lift of the heels, the simple wish to fly, sent him soaring effortlessly up and up to impossible heights in limitless space, where he drifted or dived or spun as the whim took him, sometimes hovering with the millimetre precision of a hummingbird, sometimes dropping into the bullet-like plunge of a falcon. The sheer sensual joy he got from the freedom of flight was a thousand times more vivid than anything he experienced by day, just as it had been when he was young. This was how it used to be.

His night life was once more his true life. As his night self grew stronger, more vibrant, his day self dwindled, lost substance – grew fainter in the margins of the Book. 'Real' life was such a brittle thing. Too noisy, too clamorous... and too fragile. When he did occasionally have to go out in daylight, he seemed to have become all but invisible, immaterial. He trod so softly that he scarcely touched the ground, he displaced no air, he made no sound. He almost felt he might be able to walk through walls; much of the time he had the feeling that he was walking through people and they through him. But, of course, he was still present, he could still be seen by people who saw, and one day –

“John? John!”

He was vaguely aware of the voice but didn't connect it with himself. Had he looked back, he would have seen the eager face of an old school friend. His best friend at school, in fact. But he kept on walking, barely making contact with the pavement. As he approached a corner, his old friend, who had broken into a jog to catch up with him, got within a few yards.

“John!”

Turning the corner, still oblivious to the shouting of his name, a strange sensation filled him, as though he were being gently inflated with helium. He became very light-headed, light-bodied, and his feet seemed to lift together off the pavement. He felt blissfully giddy and for a few seconds completely forgot where he was...

Some moments later, his friend also turned the corner.

He was confronted with a completely empty side street with no doors or alleyways, just the high, blank sides of two department stores. He nearly tripped over something and looked down. There was a heap of evacuated clothes, a pair of shoes, and a satchel lying on the pavement.

High, high above him, coming from an ever more distant somewhere in the blue infinity overhead, he heard the unmistakable sound of laughter.

Highly Commended

Perspex

Andreas Smith

‘Well, young lady, let’s see where they are. Miss Churchill, you said?’

‘No, Samantha Church, but you can call me Sam.’

Things weren’t going well for Mrs Vaughan. Although making a cup of tea was the ultimate test, there were other tests she really ought to pass too. Despite being in her own home – the only one she had known in the forty-five years of her married life, and then the ten years after as a widow – she was struggling to find the cups she must have stored in the same cupboard for decades. Sam noted down this fact on her clipboard assessment form: ‘Inability to locate familiar items, for example, cups for the tea.’

As they sat at the kitchen table, she of course willed Mrs Vaughan on. Of the three people she had seen so far today she had failed all three, though in her judgement one of them, hardly a long way ‘down the road’ and anyway, unlike the other two, not really elderly, should have been capable of passing.

The assessment form was what it was though, and she was required to follow its diktats, no matter what her personal feelings. The experts on dementia, and the experts on the health and safety issues surrounding dementia, certainly hadn’t made up questions and tasks just for the sake of it. It was more than her job’s worth, though, to give ‘good’ marks unwarranted by the form, even if in her view a particular task had been completed nearly satisfactorily.

Mrs Vaughan, for instance, back there in the living room, had correctly named her son and her daughter – the photographs were on the mantelpiece – but hadn’t been able to recall the names of their respective spouses. A serious failing, perhaps, but then she’d had no trouble in naming her five grandchildren, and that with only a little hesitation as she skipped through the multi-syllabic names: Penelope, Margaret, Christopher ... Still, as assessor Sam was obliged to note down that Mrs Vaughan couldn’t name her own son-in-law, her own daughter-in-law. But then Mrs Vaughan had only to walk three steps before she realised that the wrong shoes were on the wrong feet. She’d said it herself – ‘Forgive me. How silly of me!’ – and corrected the mistake on her own, by quite simply sitting down and exchanging the shoes. All of this eminently sensible, of course, but the form, clipped onto the clipboard and lying there on the kitchen table, was becoming increasingly covered in black negativity: ‘Mrs Vaughan got her shoes mixed up,’ which quite annihilated the good news that she had subsequently succeeded in un-mixing this mix-up!

That’s the way it had to be, though, Sam told herself for the thousandth time in her career, mentally stamping on the burgeoning weeds of out-of-place sympathy, what with the consequences of an accident – a fire, a fall, an overflowing bath – being too grim to contemplate (for Mrs Vaughan, naturally, but also for her, as assessor, who would forever be marked down as one of those assessors who had assessed incorrectly). And this cup of tea business was supposed to act as the deal-maker or -breaker ... If the client – everyone was a ‘client’ these days, of course, even though he or she would in the end be obliged to do what they were told to do – had, as they say, ‘performed in such a way that it wasn’t possible to make an unambiguous assessment as to their ability to safely look after themselves and live on their own, then the matter might be determined by the cup-of-tea test.’ In this case Mrs Vaughan was, so far, not doing well.

‘Ah, here they are, my darling!’ she called out, at last finding the cups, but only after opening all the cupboards but one. ‘I’m sorry, but I’ve forgotten your name again.’

‘Well done,’ she said, while inwardly shaking her head. ‘It’s Sam, Mrs Vaughan. Now what do we do next?’

‘We make the tea?’

‘Yes, we make the tea – for the two of us, perhaps. Wouldn’t that be nice?’

Mrs Vaughan nodded and then picked up the tea caddy. She twisted the lid clockwise, thereby screwing it tight onto the container. Sam watched, hesitated with pen poised over the form, but then decided to scribble nothing. ‘Perhaps try turning it the other way, Mrs Vaughan,’ she said. But Mrs Vaughan had over-tightened the lid and it just wouldn’t budge. Although an assessor wasn’t supposed to intervene physically – her instructions clearly restricted her to verbal interventions – she took the caddy and opened it herself.

‘We’ll have biscuits with the tea, won’t we?’ asked Mrs Vaughan.

‘Yes, of course, if you have any, that would be very nice,’ she replied. ‘But first let’s make the tea, shall we?’

The old lady took two tea bags and deposited them in the two cups. She then picked up the kettle and tried to pour water into the cups. The kettle was empty. They both laughed at that, perhaps a little loudly and a little too long, as if they were trying to hide something a little embarrassing.

‘I’ll put some water in the kettle,’ said Mrs Vaughan in a self-confident voice, as though she had never entertained any doubts about the matter.

And indeed she did go over to the sink with the kettle, turn on the cold-water tap, and fill the kettle till the water overflowed the rim. Sam, again going beyond the borders that marked the limits of her responsibilities, turned the tap off and poured out some of the water.

‘Good,’ she said, handing the kettle to Mrs Vaughan, though it wasn’t good at all, as she well knew.

‘Let’s get it on the boil then – I’m dying for that cuppa!’

As Mrs Vaughan plugged in the kettle and then switched it on to boil, Sam, as usual feeling a little guilty that her opinion could have such power to determine another’s last years, once again questioned the career she had chosen. After all, it wasn’t turning out to be the straightforward socially useful role she had once envisaged for myself, not if her judgement on whether an old person of failing mind was capable of making a cup of tea for herself was the decisive factor in deciding whether that old person, in this case Mrs Vaughan, could be trusted to live alone in her own home, or would be safer being looked after in a care home. The truth was that Mrs Vaughan (and many like her) had been wildly optimistic in expecting her son and daughter, he living in Canada, she in London, both with families and both working in responsible jobs, to give up their lives ‘to keep an eye on me,’ as she had put it (and that with a smile too). Sam had of course recorded all this on Mrs Vaughan’s form.

There was no hiss of water on the boil coming from the kettle.

‘You need to switch it on at the socket, Mrs Vaughan,’ she said, but pulled back from scribbling on the form, once again giving her the benefit of the doubt, as the old lady said: ‘Oh yes, I know that – that’s what I was just about to do!’

Mrs Vaughan did what she intended and then swung round to face her assessor. She wanted to say something but held back. Sam also wanted to say something but she too held back. The silence was faintly unsettling, so when Mrs Vaughan removed her hand from her throat, which she had been clutching rather anxiously, Sam was glad that Mrs Vaughan’s locket, now exposed after being hidden in her blouse, gave her an excuse to break the silence: ‘What a lovely locket, Mrs Vaughan – is that your late husband?’

The locket displayed a black-and-white picture of a young man, dressed in military uniform though bareheaded. The picture was oval-shaped to fit the oval locket, made of gold, Sam presumed, and dangling from a gold chain. The face in the locket looked as if it were on the brink of breaking into a smile but suppressing it in order to appear serious, at least for the purposes of the picture.

But he wasn’t Mrs Vaughan’s late husband: ‘No,’ she said, ‘this is my brother, Edmund. He was killed in the war.’

She turned the locket over and held it away from her chest so that she could see the face. At the same time there was a low rattle and then a hiss from the kettle: it was boiling at last!

‘It’s all that remains, just about, this and this’ – she snapped open the locket and squinted through her glasses at something inside – ‘and anyway it’s my favourite picture of him. He’s smiling without smiling, if you know what I mean.’

Mrs Vaughan was quiet for a few moments.

‘What is it – inside?’ Sam asked.

Mrs Vaughan rotated the open locket. It was just a piece of deformed plastic, as far as Sam could make out, an inch long but irregular in shape, as though it had come from a larger – a shattered – whole. ‘Perspex,’ said the old lady. ‘At the time it was the new material, almost unbreakable, they said.’

‘And you wear it round your neck – this perspex?’

She took out the little lump – it was only lightly secured by a clasp – and held it up to the light of the kitchen window.

‘Yes, I wear it round my neck – always.’

The two women gazed at the perspex fragment, now yellowish with age and almost opaque.

‘It was from the cockpit,’ Mrs Vaughan said, and then turned to the kettle: ‘Is it boiled? Shall I make the tea?’ Although the water had indeed boiled, Sam ignored Mrs Vaughan’s question and instead asked her: ‘What cockpit would that be, then?’

‘Well,’ said Mrs Vaughan, while also taking it upon herself to pour the boiled water, first, into Sam’s cup, second, into her own cup, being very careful to get the order right, though in fact the cups were identical and there was no order to keep, ‘he was always showing off, you know, to me and to my friends. He would play tricks and make jokes all the time, and even when he went away to university – I was then nine – he would send me letters every week, full of stories of what he and his friends had been getting up to. A lot of it involved water.’

At the word ‘water’ she began dipping the tea bags, simultaneously, left hand and right (she’d first put the perspex fragment down on the table).

‘Still,’ she went on, ‘he was a brilliant student – a mathematician – and was the first person from his grammar school ever to go to Cambridge to study mathematics. My parents were very proud of him, though of course I knew little about it, and I and my friends just laughed at his silliness and his jokes and tricks. He was only eighteen, after all, almost just a boy himself, and I had no idea that I was supposed to regard my brother as someone not just special but extra-special, as my mother used to say. But then I had no idea that he, and I, had come from such a ‘humble’ background. It all seemed wonderful to me, the little village, the fields and hedgerows and woods, and beyond these the moors mysteriously going on forever behind miles of dry-stone walls and under endless empty skies. Then one day the sky wasn’t empty – it was full of ... But I’m spoiling the tea!’

She almost yanked the teabags out of the cups and then deposited them, quite appropriately, in the kitchen’s pedal bin. Though she wasn’t supposed to prompt her clients, who, if they got this far, usually remembered to go to the fridge for milk, Sam made an exception just this once – she instinctively looked around, though, just in case her boss were somehow invisibly present and watching the proceedings – and reminded Mrs Vaughan that the milk was probably in the fridge (she would have felt uncomfortable with a certainly).

‘And,’ she asked, as Mrs Vaughan fetched the carton of milk, ‘the sky was full of –?’

Mrs Vaughan bit her tongue as she poured milk into the first cup, Sam’s, and then into her own, and remained silent as she brought the cups to the table (she hadn’t thought to stir the milk into the over-brewed tea, and the offer of sugar seemed not to cross her mind). Was her lower lip now trembling a little out of emotion, or was it merely old age?

‘Thank you,’ said Sam, and was about to mention the biscuits, but Mrs Vaughan sat down and immediately went on: ‘The sky was full of him. He was halfway through his university career when he joined the Royal Air Force, as a pilot – a bomber pilot. He was twenty by then and I was in the final year at the village school, hoping to get into the grammar school in town myself, if I could pass the entrance exam, though no one expected me to follow in the footsteps of my brother. It was April 1944, the 1st to be precise, and we’d been told that bombers would be practising over the moors – low-flying manoeuvres, though no one then knew that these were in preparation for D-Day, two months later, but then a big secret. All we knew was that dozens of aeroplanes would be flying over the village and then low over the moors on this particular day, my brother and six fellow crewmen included, and that at midday, or thereabouts, the entire school, all five teachers and sixty pupils, with my friends and me among them, would be allowed to stand in the school field and watch as my brother, the best pupil ever to have attended our little school, proudly flew his bomber over the school, and as a sign to us all, his old teachers and his sister and all the schoolchildren, dip his wings to the left and then to the right, before flying away across the moors. My brother had arranged the spectacle with the headmistress through my father, and the whole village intended to turn out to watch the skies. They said it was ‘a morale booster’, I remember.’

Mrs Vaughan was lost in thought for a few moments.

‘And did your ‘morale booster’ turn up on time?’ Sam asked.

‘Oh yes,’ she replied, brightening up but then immediately becoming serious again, ‘none of us even screamed as we watched the big plane, the last of the great fly-by, roar right over us, far too low, one engine on fire, the other sputtering like a choking dog, the whole thing lurching wildly from side to side and losing height every moment, with someone in the cockpit waving wildly for us to get away, as if it really were an April Fools’ Day joke, before the bomber disappeared over the old dry-stone wall and somewhere out there on the moors there was soon a great explosion and clouds of smoke drifting all over us, making us all cough like mad. The headmistress looked as if she had swallowed her tongue, but she soon recovered herself and told us to get our coats and go straight home. One of the teachers – Miss Davy, my favourite – smiled at me and, brushing my hair with her hand, said, “You too, Frances, go straight home.” But we didn’t go straight home, at least not the older children, the nine- and ten-year-olds: we rushed away from the village, about twenty of us, towards the moor, and climbed up onto the dry-stone wall, where we spent the next few hours watching all sorts of men in different-coloured uniforms doing things I’d never seen before: putting out fires, heaving large chunks of twisted metal onto trailers – these were attached to tractors brought by the local farmers, keen to get involved themselves – and gently lifting burnt black things that they then wrapped in blankets and also put on the trailers, though much more gently than they’d done with the metal. A large piece of a wing was sticking out from it all, I remember, and it looked as if it were saluting the world as the tractor dragged it off the moor and along the country roads.

“Did you see him go?” said one of my friends. “The pilot parachuted out of there just in time.” Yes, of course I had seen, but I was still too much in a state of almost total numbness to answer her. And when all the soldiers and police officers and firemen and farmers had abandoned the scene, my friend had to drag me down from the wall to follow the others, whooping and shouting as they ran down the slope to the patch of blackened moor where the bomber had crashed. The boys were disappointed that nearly all the metal and bits of engine and things had been taken away already, leaving almost nothing for them. But the girls were just over the moon, scrabbling about in the scorched heather for pieces of perspex. Thousands of fragments, all over the place, perfect for making jewellery. My friends filled their pockets and looked very pleased with themselves. I took just this one piece here and hid it in my room. But after the war, when my mother gave me this locket with my brother’s picture, I put it inside, in secret, so it would be near my heart. It’s all that remains of that day.’

Together they gazed at the little piece of perspex before them on the table. It seemed like a lifetime before Mrs Vaughan, taking a sip of tea and nodding at her guest to follow suit, asked: ‘Is the tea all right, young lady – I’m sorry but I’ve forgotten your name again?’

No, it wasn’t all right – it was terrible, but nonetheless Sam replied: ‘Yes, Mrs Vaughan, the tea is excellent.’

She had passed the only test that really mattered.

How to Swim

Helena Markovic-Buck

It was not yet 6:30am on a cold, dark November morning and Don was already out of bed and stripped bare. He looked at himself in the mirror, his body pale as a ghost. On the floor next to him was the black suit he took off last night. He thought about the day before; the funeral a blur of hand shaking and thank you's for coming and the same words repeated over and over again.

We are sorry for your loss.

We are so sorry.

For your loss.

Your loss.

Loss.

In his hands, Don clutched a bright pink hat covered in nylon butterflies. He eased his fingers into the swimming hat's insides, pulling the latex apart. As he lifted his arms, the butterflies fluttered together as if readying for flight. He bowed his head, squeezing into the cap. It tugged at his hair like a school bully. The hat was too small; it wasn't made for him, it was made for Margot's dainty head. Margot that was now dead. Margot that was buried yesterday morning as the autumn sun shone over the cemetery's black and grey headstones. It seemed somehow the wrong kind of weather for such a sombre occasion — a brightness which the celebrant turned into Margot shining down on them from above and which Don, who didn't believe in a heaven up there, inwardly cursed.

With the swimming hat in place, Don met his eyes in the mirror, allowing the gaze to travel down the length of his body, taking in the deep wrinkles and sagging skin, apart from on his face where the swimming cap pulled the flesh so tight it looked like severe cosmetic surgery. He'd never paid much attention to his body, preferring to be up in his head, working his mind rather than his muscles.

What clever wheels are you turning today? Margot would ask whenever he stared off into space, as he often did, as Margot chatted on. Don preferred to ignore his body unless there was a new ache or pain that required investigating, which were becoming more frequent these days, now that he was retired.

You need to keep your body as well as your brain active, Margot would tell him. But they both knew Don wasn't a physical man, not the sporty type. Margot, on the other hand, rarely sat down. Even at home she would busy herself with one task or another. And of course, there was the swimming.

Margot loved to swim; water seduced her. She always packed a spare swimming cap, costume and quick-drying towel in her handbag just in case they happened to pass a suitable bathing spot. And then she would be off into a still lake or the foaming sea, leaving Don holding her bag and clothes. He would keep a careful watch of her bobbing head like a lifeguard. Not that Don possessed any water safety qualifications. In fact, Don particularly disliked cold water so he rarely went swimming.

When the couple would beach walk together, Margot sometimes managed to persuade her husband to take off his shoes and socks for a paddle. He obliged, but mainly because he enjoyed her playfulness when she made her little toes wiggle up to his, like sea creatures making friends. Come on Don, let your feet live a little, she would say.

Water as therapy came into its own for Margot after she heard that cold water could help to relieve the hot flashes and anxiousness of menopause. She started by swimming at the local lido, setting her alarm early every morning and heading off for what she called her shot of happy hormones. She would return wide-eyed and ruddy-faced with something of a glow about her as if she was cleansed. Soon, she was going four times a week. She would tell Don about the friendships and bonds that formed as the group swapped tips on the best way to keep warm in cold water. When a nearby bathing lake was restored to its former glory in the local park, Margot and her group quit the lido for what they saw as a wilder and more at one with nature swimming experience, despite still being very much in the heart of suburbia.

If you wear too many layers or go in for those all-in-one wetsuits, you don't get the benefits of the full body tingle, Margot told him once, as she warmed her hands on a steaming mug of tea after an early morning swim one winter. It's glorious, Don, like the cold water is somehow telling your body to give you a hug from the inside out.

Don mumbled something about his hugs warming her up from the outside in without her having to leave home and go swimming. Margot laughed and placed her tea-warm palms on either side of his face as she reached up onto her tiptoes for a kiss.

How he missed her, Don thought, that laugh and that smile. He would have to get used to new things like the silence of the house and the empty spaces where Margot used to be.

It was nearing 6:45am. Don was downstairs now by the front door looking at the gap formerly occupied by Margot's coats. He was wearing faded blue swimming trunks and a grey dressing gown with a towel draped over his shoulders like a boxer about to enter the ring. He took his car keys from the hook and set off for the lake.

Half an hour later, he was sitting in the warmth of the vehicle's heating system, reluctant to leave. Eventually he climbed out, pulling his dressing gown cord tight around his middle and holding the towel close to his chest like a toddler wanting comfort from a cuddly toy. His scalp was sweating in the plastic confines of the swimming hat, the rim of which was digging deep into his skin.

The butterfly cap was Margot's favourite; Don purchased it as a silly stocking filler one year. Margot had been delighted. She put it straight on and then went back to sipping her Buck's Fizz as if there was nothing unusual about wearing a swimming hat indoors on Christmas Day. Not that there would be another Christmas together now, thought Don. Another thing he would have to get used to.

The lake was curved like a bow and surrounded by a grassy bank and a pathway that snaked off into woodlands. Don walked along one of the paths passing sycamore and maple trees, his slip-on shoes crunching on the beechnuts covering the ground, until he arrived at the south-west tip of the lake. A pair of grey squirrels rustled through the damp bronze beech leaves before scurrying up the trunk of a nearby tree. The air felt cold in his nostrils and turned to fog in front of his face when he breathed out.

Wondering where to leave his things, he saw a woman to his left rearranging her pile of belongings, making sure they were carefully tucked up away from the waters' edge. She stood up and made eye contact with him, before her gaze drifted up to the swimming hat. Don touched his head self-consciously. The woman nodded, turned away, and began to walk towards the water. Don realised he had forgotten to bring spare clothes to change into afterwards.

He undressed. The cold air made his skin bristle. He turned around and faced the lake like an opponent readying himself for battle.

Apparently, Julie read you're only meant to stay in the water for one minute for every degree, he remembered Margot saying, as he wondered what temperature the water was today. He also recalled her advice to newcomers to cold water swimming not to jump or dive in but to enter the water gradually, giving the body time to adjust.

If he tried to get in slowly, Don knew he would never make it in above his knees, never mind his shoulders. He decided the best course of action was to ignore his late wife's advice, find the deepest part of the lake and launch himself. He headed for the wooden jetty where he'd watched people jump in during a summer heatwave a few years earlier when he and Margot visited the lake for a walk in the shade of the ancient woodland. The wood of the jetty felt cool and slimy on his bare feet; the water looked dark and uninviting beyond.

The trick, he remembered his wife saying, is to sort your breathing before you go in so that way the cold won't be so much of a shock. Don scoffed at this at the time. Breathing was what the body did naturally. There was no need to control it and there certainly was no way that doing some fancy breathing was going to take away from ice-cold lake water hitting his epidermis. Nevertheless, Don closed his eyes and started to count. Four breaths in, nice and slowly through his nose, just like Margot said. And then eight breaths out through his mouth, his lips pursed like he was blowing a kiss to the lady of the lake. He repeated this process several times before opening his eyes, looking down into the murky brown water and hurling himself forwards.

The shock of the cold water took his breath away. It stung his skin as his body hit the surface and then plummeted down. His toes made contact with the squelchy mud and silt at the bottom. It felt unnatural and wrong for his feet to be touching the belly of a lake. But no sooner was he down than he was back up again. When he surfaced, he was gasping for air; his mouth made involuntary noises that did not sound like his own.

The cold was all consuming. It sent shivers from his curled toes up to his chattering teeth. He tried to breathe, slowly like before, but he felt as if he was unable to get any air in his lungs, his body actively rejecting this essential function that would keep him alive. The cold water slid over his bare skin like a swarm of icy eels. Don tried to swim but his limbs seemed to have forgotten what to do. He made to swim closer to the steps of the jetty, readying himself to get out when he heard a splash behind him. He turned around to see the woman from the lakeside.

First time? she asked, with a serene smile, as if she was swimming in a completely different water temperature.

Don nodded and his butterflies nodded with him.

It gets easier, honestly. Try and stay in for a little bit longer.

I don't think I can, stammered Don, teeth clanging together.

Keep your feet off the ground, keep moving and you'll be okay, she reassured him, before swimming back towards the middle of the lake, where a small group were gathered, treading water.

Trying to keep his chin above the waterline, Don decided to follow the woman before his whole body seized up. His legs were starting to cramp, the beginnings of pins and needles radiating through his hands and feet. He was swimming a style of breast stroke as though his body had switched into double time, although he still wasn't covering much ground.

A panic of thoughts came quick and fast; his nervous system was in survival mode. How long would he stay in? Why was he even enduring this cold water torture? Margot never suggested, as she lay dying, that he take up wild swimming on her behalf. What was the point of risking hypothermia for the love of a woman who was no longer here? What was the point in anything anymore? As the cold water took hold, Don realised that this was it. Life for him, now that his 'til death do us part was gone, had no meaning. He wanted the water to make him feel something, anything. But all he felt was numb.

Margot confessed to him that cold water swimming was like a drug, the way it stripped you away layer by layer, almost like a rebirth, until you were back to your true essence. Don admired his wife's ability to lean into those things that exposed her vulnerabilities, whereas he would always back away, choosing to keep himself hidden from view.

You can't be anyone but your authentic self in the cold water, Margot said. We don't bother with small talk when we're in the water, we get right down to what matters. I have told my group things I have never told anyone, not even my oldest friends.

Don was shocked at this. What secrets was his wife revealing that even he, her husband, may not know? He never asked. The water was her world. This lake might know more about his wife than he ever did. He wanted it to be his world too.

Don ripped off the swimming hat and flung it away. At the same time, he opened his mouth to scream. But instead, he inhaled a mouthful of water.

His shoulders and then his chin disappeared below the surface. It was fitting, he thought, to take his final breaths here. People would think it was planned. Grieving widower commits suicide at wife's favourite swimming spot. No-one would consider that it might be an unhappy accident, the fault of a body shocked into submergence.

As he sank, he started to feel something. A small sensation, like a match lit somewhere deep within. And it was as if this match found a candle and the candle found some wood and before long a glow was coming from inside his body and radiating out.

And there it was.

The hug.

It was as if Margot was here with him, giving him a hug from the inside out.

Don felt himself relax and let go.

There were hands all around him, fingers gripping his skin, and lifting him up to the surface. He could see faces looking down at him, their eyes glistening, as though wet with tears.

We recognised the hat, he heard one of them say. Margot hoped you would come.

Don heard another voice, the voice of his wife, and he wasn't sure if it was in his head or coming from somewhere outside of him. Her tone was soft and comforting: You know sometimes, Don, it's not about swimming, it's about learning how to float.

With his body supported by strangers' palms, Don let himself rest back, salty tears meeting lake water. His exposed head was ringed with a red like a permanent marker where the swimming cap had been. Sounds muffled as his ears sank into water, his gaze drifting upwards to the brightening morning sky.

Next to him, the pink hat floated away on a journey of its own, the butterflies flat and still, as if they were sleeping.

Imago

Alison Armstrong

Imago - n. 1 *Entomology* the final and fully developed adult stage of an insect.
2 *Psychoanalysis* an unconscious idealised mental image of someone, which influences a person's behaviour.
- *Oxford English Dictionary*

I feel the shadow of her approach. Feel the cooled darkness of her fallen shape across my skin. I keep my eyes closed, pretend I haven't seen her. I am concentrating on the spin of the Earth, it is mind-boggling how imperceptible it all is, the speed of it. Six hundred miles per hour, at this latitude, give or take a mile.

'Thought I'd find you here. Miss Mary of the field.' She floats down beside me, almost weightless and slipping her foot from a Day-Glo flip-flop, stretches her long, sun-gilded leg over mine. Her toe reaches for my trainer and kicks.

'Not exactly Sherlock Holmes, are you?' It's the field behind her house she finds me in. I always wait for her here. Hers is one of the houses we don't go in. One that keeps what's inside to itself.

Level with the feathered heads of grasses, I watch two white butterflies fly in tandem, held together and repelled as though by a magnetic force, always returning to a fixed distance between them. A chaos of wings kept in order by their dance.

Laying her head back, she lifts her hand to shield herself from the sun's dazzle as she looks across. I see this without turning to her, not wanting to return her gaze just yet. I feel the pattern of her breathing as she inhales, exhales; absorb it so that my breaths sync with hers, like we too hold something that the white butterflies know. I smell the warm pineapple scent of her, like a gorse bush in flower. She is quiet beside me, holding her energy inside, but it won't last long.

'Let's go to Shaw's. Find some diggers,' she says, manoeuvring to sit cross-legged, facing me in one extended choreographed movement. She is looking at me, expectant of reaction. Ready for the next thing.

She can never hold quiet for long; she is too full of unspent energy. Sometimes it tires me just thinking about all that energy of hers, spinning around inside her. I am a different type of girl. More mousy, less energy. It is just the way it is. 'Flighty' my mother has said – among other things; she has an inventory of adjectives lined up against her. Shaw's is the main amusement arcade in town. Diggers is what we call holidaymakers. Sometimes we look for them at the arcades, at the beach. It's probably where the name comes from – all that digging in the sand. It passes the time. Withernsea can get boring, in and out of season.

I tell her about some vapourer moth caterpillars I have found. 'Come see them instead.' She isn't interested. Calls me 'nature geek'. She places her tongue playfully in the bite of her teeth when she smiles. A small pink slug held captive for a second. She nods towards the lighthouse that looms high above the town end of Arthur Street.

'Wonder why they built it there. Not nearer the sea?'

I shrug. 'Probs because the cliffs keep collapsing.' It is true, I'm becoming obsessed with these clay cliffs. The crumbling edge of them. Month by month, you can see how the land disappears. How the whole coastline is changing its contours, shedding one shape for another. One day, the whole town will be gone. Erased. Following others lost before it, their locations dotted on old maps like the scattered beads of a necklace. Last week, we ran along the cliff tops, holding hands, leaning over the edge into the wind. A game she likes to play. I lost heart and pulled back, fear overcoming the thrill. The sensation of it, drilling into bones, flooding muscles with dread. The thought that it was just the wind that buffeted us, that it could drop, and let us fall, flipped in my stomach. I lost the power to do it then – my body returned to a lump of unformed clay.

‘Why’re you always so into bugs?’ She curls and waves her index fingers in front of her forehead to effect antennae and rolls her eyes. Skittering on tip toes, she turns and side-steps ahead before falling back in line with the pace of my walk.

‘They made cocoons around themselves. They’ll emerge completely transformed. Met-a-morph-o-sis.’ I slow each syllable to draw her into the significance of it, but her expression moves to remoteness. In the space between us, my words are stripped of meaning.

‘They’ll still be bugs, though?’ She skips ahead, pirouettes, says something else, but the sound flits away, before it can be held and pinned down.

The push-penny near the entrance of Shaw’s churns away in the shove of its shelves – forwards-backwards like a quick-motion tide. And splintering in all directions, the delinquent fizz and rattle and ding of the machines. The interior lit up by the rows of slots and arcade games and one-armed-bandits so that above the low-level glare, a darkened gloom seems to hover, only broken here and there by neon signs in confected, hand-written colours. The pinball machine spits out a silvered ball to hurl against an arrangement of barriers, its reflected image flies off in the mirrored upright behind, forever hurtling through space. Distortions of tunes rise up and fall, on infinite repeat. She has found two diggers. Average specimens. Glancing up, I see her throw her head back and laugh at something one of them has said, her teeth unnaturally white in the fluorescent glow of the grab machine. The hyped-up mechanics of metal and glass and plastic whirr on and flash, pulsing with promise. All the edges and contrasts, dissolved in the hypnotic blur, seem to project from a world beyond this one. The moving darkness beneath the artificial lights. You can feel it in the lower part of your spine, the pull of it. And the exaggerated way she flirts, her thrown laugh – nobody can be that funny. She nods towards me and gives me the look of wide-eyed-urgency, to go over. I stay by the concertina doors, where the dirt collected in its track meets the dirt of the stained carpet. Outside, a confetti of discarded fag ends litters the tarmac. In my head, a diagram charting the layers of different dirt assembles itself. The dots and lines and grey areas spilling over. From the arcade next door, a bingo-caller slurs a measured, slow, breathed-over, litany of numbers and their aliases in a hungover, dry-gravel voice that even the unsympathetic must feel pity for and will his shift to come soon to a merciful end. Again she laughs, high and loud, unafraid of attention she might draw. I can never see what she sees in these boys. In one way or another, they are all the same; their differences smoothed over by their roles in the game – their one-dimensional functioning. How neatly they all slot into it.

I think of the vapourer moth caterpillars, tight in their cocoons. An exercise in waiting. In patience. They were like exotic things when I found them. Things belonging to some other place. One following the other, moving their soft bodies in a rippling locomotion. Each had these four bright-yellow tufts of hairs high up on their backs. Smaller orange tufts arranged along the length of their dark velvet bodies, and at the end of the tail, long black hairs rose together like horns in defiance of the world. They were something to see. Magical – set against all the dullness. I looked them up. The moth they turn into is orange-brown with a white, comma-shaped spot on each forewing. A pause separating one shape of life from another.

She brings the diggers over, the one she’s chosen and his short-strawed friend. ‘C’mon, we’re going for chips.’ There’s no victory in the way she says this. It is matter of fact. Business as usual.

Inside the Golden Haddock she gives me the exasperated, wave-shaped look that means put some effort in. I roll my eyes and inhale the oil and vinegar smell. Her chatter goes into overdrive then, along some invisible axis, spreading out in compensation for my failings. The electric fly zapper on the top corner of the back wall zaps an insect it has lured in with its UV bulb. Vito, who was two years ahead of us at school, places battered fish and sausages in the heated glass cupboards by the counter. They shine under the heat lamps. Their fat drips through the rows of small holes that perforate the stainless steel base. I imagine it collecting beneath, out of sight, golden and congealed. A shine of sweat pulses at the curled dampness of Vito’s hairline, showing beneath the elastic edge of the white cap he wears. It must be hot working the fryers, with all the lights and heated sections of counter framing him into the space. He concentrates on the task in hand and scoops hot chips, glistening with grease, into paper cones. His eyes blank over us. He never acknowledges recognition, nor comments on our endless quest for free chips.

We eat them at the pier entrance – climbing onto the wall between the two crenelated towers. Our legs dangle from the castle-like façade and we look out to where the pier once stood. The tide is far out. Hard to tell whether its retreating or already turned. Wooden groynes are set like spines down to the water’s edge, where small birds run back and forth in groups, held to the rhythm of the waves. She tries to draw me in, but no matter how she flashes her eyes and flicks her hair, they are not interested in how

many books I read or how good I am at school stuff or how I can recite God Save the Queen backwards so that it sounds like an alien language. And I, for my part, cannot muster any enthusiasm in return, despite her looks and gestures in my direction.

‘Is she any good at dictation?’ One of them says.

The other laughs at the predictable offence and takes a vape pen from his jacket pocket, inhaling a small cloud of pomegranate and cherry, like a Poundland James Dean. The steam clouding the air, sickly alongside the grease of chips.

‘Tell us what happened to the pier, again?’ She directs this towards me, to shore up against the comment.

I shrug, say nothing. She knows I know the answer. And she must know it too, the number of times I have played the part and told her.

Defeated, she throws chips, one by one, for the gulls to catch mid-air. She is quiet. Her eyes narrowed, watching the gulls hover in the updraughts, dive with practised guile. Then, without warning, she jumps up, throwing her empty chip cone up into the air and batting it onto the beach, with a perfect backhand. Wiping her hands against the fraying edge of her shorts, she flings me a defiant look, knowing I can’t stand the way people chuck their rubbish there. Encouraged by the native littering, the boys throw their cones beach-ward too, so now there are three chip cones, scuttling along the sand, catching against the pebbles. Triplicate irritation. Knowing too that I am watching her, irked now, she strides out ahead of me. Her affected indifference, her lightness exaggerated, mannered. Tall and quick she glides. Her perfection stepping out beyond my imperfections. I scrunch my chip cone into my pocket.

By the toilet block with the sea views we lean over the wall to look at Valley Gardens; a small rectangle aimed at pre-teen leisure between the amusements and the promenade. Some joker has been bent on amusement of their own and has put crime-scene police tape all over the crazy golf. At the hole with the windmill, two of its blades broken off, all the green felt has warped and shrunk, curling at the edges to create an impassable lip underneath it, as if in outrage at the reduced-blade-ease of passing beneath. Near the Memorial Avenue end, where the buses stop, there is an over-sized, brightly-coloured statue of a crab – surreal, in the style of those hand-painted cows; it is raised at an odd angle on a small concrete mound that serves as a plinth. It is jaunty, waving its claw. Paper flaps from a notice board, where part of a flyer has come unstuck; flapping in the sea breeze like wings trying to take off.

We cross the road back towards the promenade and see the slow shifting return of tide, our tongues stolen by the swell of some falling sense of things, some continuum of dullness, which has rubbed into all of us. In apology for the Valley Gardens’ vista, she taps the boy’s shoulder with her fingertips, and he puts a greasy hand to the small of her back, braces himself to pull her towards the storm wall. There is something mechanical about the way she laughs then, something appalling and empty at the centre of it all. This game she plays. I feel the other boy step closer to walk beside me, carrying an expectant silence in the changed pace of his slouched jeans, slung low on his hips, while some clumsy, half-stalled suggestion works its way across synapses. The rhythm of his breathing is pitched forward in concentration, and in the breath before words I take myself off, a brief raised hand of a wave from a safe distance, to see their three shapes shifting to silhouettes against the light reflected off the sea.

Small concrete front yards have tried and failed to separate a row of houses from the pavement. Doors opened to the summer heat are intimate with the street. The gaze is drawn quickly to gather details, which give themselves up like offerings. A pair of boots kicked off on a mat, a sandy pile of pebbles on a doorstep, a child’s scooter, pink and scuffed leaning against a door frame. Voices echo down a hallway, overspent and over-carried from an argument, ongoing resentments. Foreshortened expectations billowing, like laundry on a line. A scrat of litter slapped against an iron gate twitches in the breeze. A nerve severed, raw. Chip grease lines my throat, slick and heavy. Turning the corner of Seaside Road, my slumped reflection catches in the darkened glass of a window, half-hidden there – waiting or refusing, to emerge.

In the quiet of my room, between abandoned clothes and collapsed piles of books, I crouch down before the cupboard where I have put the jar with the cocoons inside. I hesitate, anticipate the smell when I take off the lid. It has become familiar in the last weeks. The smell of old foliage, caterpillar shit, the shedding of old skin – a ripeness mouldering to stale, fallen like small wrongs to the bottom of the jar. The chip grease has balled in my throat, the choke like an unswallowed desolation. The glass is cold and I don’t notice at first, the two fat, white, lice-like things that have rifled the cocoons. Squat imposters. Thinking they have parasitised and eaten my moths, I look up vapourer moths again on my

phone. Read of the male/female dimorphism – how the female is pale and flightless with a swollen abdomen. Only the males have those coloured wings. I look again into the jar – at those naked, anaemic-looking things and shudder to stop their crawl under my skin. Not parasites at all, nor an anomaly as I had first thought. This is the natural female state. This grotesqueness, how they were meant to be. I put the jar in a bag, cannot wait to be rid of them. Walk back to the path where they were found. Tip them out and watch as they right themselves to pull their bleached forms forward, after all that promise of colour.

I look towards the sea, refocus, take a breath, think about how the horizon is just an illusion, a trick against the ongoing vastness of sea and sky. The wide white rim of granite boulders at the top of the beach almost glows in the dwindling light. They were brought across the North Sea from Norway with the last of the money from the EU, and have given the town a few more years, perhaps another hundred – depending on sea and optimism levels, the growing frequency of storms. Polystyrene food trays, beer bottles and cans, are caught in the crevices. And in places, on the beach, the sand has been washed away, revealing the brown clay beneath, like patches on a balding dog.

She looked somehow dulled as she threw her chips to the gulls. Her mouth pulled thin. The grey shadows that afflict her eyes when she feels all the stacked odds threaten to collapse against her. How she will go full into her routine every time, to ward it off, the flighty gestures, the back-street seductions. She didn't look at me after the chucking-of-the-chip-cone. All the meaning shifted to withheld gestures. My hands push deeper into the pockets of my jeans, the edges of my nails against the grains of fluff collected in the seams. I head toward the cliffs at the north end of town, beyond the protection of boulders. At the stretch before the caravan park, sorrel and long grasses grow on the mud overhang where no one dares to walk. I move to the edge of it, close my eyes as I lean into the push of the wind, feel the batting of the updraughts lift my hair. Each moment pushing into the next, spreading and stretching away from those bloated lice-like creatures, the slow drag of themselves, sluggish and awkward, into the future.

A Mother's Gift

Andreas Smith

My dealings with Mrs Eileen Berkeley were strictly professional, apart from our numerous brief, slightly edgy encounters in the street or at church over many years. As a relative newcomer to the town, I felt that she was always slightly suspicious of me, as if I didn't and couldn't ever quite belong here, no matter that my wife and children were natives. She was just one of those familiar faces that become part of one's mental furniture, hidden under a dust sheet, so to speak, until the sheet is removed for a few seconds during a brief "Hello, how are you, Mrs Berkeley?" or "It looks as though it might rain, Mrs Berkeley" on the High Street on a Saturday morning. On these occasions she would lower her shopping bags to the pavement, stare at the dark clouds drifting across the sky, nod her scarf-covered head in agreement, pick up her bags and then amble away through the crowd of shoppers. I would immediately replace the dust sheet and forget all about her till the next encounter.

I had had business dealings with her, now and again, through my legal practice: I am a partner in a small solicitors' office based in the town, where I specialise in wills, divorce and conveyancing. She had employed our services in order to see through the sale of her house after her husband had died and she'd decided that she wanted to move to a smaller place – a bungalow on the edge of town, in the middle of a new and rapidly expanding estate occupied almost exclusively by young couples and their small children. In short, probably not quite the right place for a lady of her age, especially if she was after peace and quiet. Not that she ever mentioned these (and anyway these days the only place where you would find peace and quiet is on the moon!). She had also deposited her will with us, although that was several years after the conveyancing work. There was nothing unusual about the will, except for one detail concerning what was to be done with a small box which she would pass on to us at some unspecified time, presumably when she felt convinced that she would shortly die. For the rest, she left all of her not-very-considerable assets to her son and his family and to her only sister. A small job for us; nothing more.

It was with this awareness that she was a client that I hid my annoyance when she called over to me after church one Sunday morning. I was in a hurry to get away with my wife and children – we'd planned a day by the sea while the weather was still good. I told my family to go to the car; I would follow them shortly. I walked over to Mrs Berkeley and asked her how I could help. She was out of breath after the short walk from the front aisle, where she always sat, to the church door and couldn't speak for a few seconds.

"Mr Wallace," she said, "it's time for me to deliver a box to you."

Of course, I couldn't at that time remember anything about her will and her instructions for the box.

The will was filed away with all the others, waiting silently in a cabinet for the unknown day.

"You remember, Mr Wallace? I said there would be a box with some bits and pieces. That I would like you to do something with it. It's in my will."

"Oh yes, Mrs Berkeley. It comes back to me now," I said, only now vaguely recollecting her instructions.

She struggled to get her breath again. It was obvious that her health was failing. Instead of the old but lively woman I'd often seen bustling in and out of shops over the years, I now saw a withered tree, its leaves fallen, its clinging roots inexorably breaking away, one by one, from the earth.

"I'll bring it round tomorrow, then," she said.

"Yes, we're open at nine, Mrs Berkeley. Give the box to my secretary. Well, good day. Take care of yourself, Mrs Berkeley."

As I was striding off, she called after me again. I turned round.

"Mr Wallace," she said, "I must give it to you. Into your hands, like. That was our agreement, remember?"

Of course, I didn't remember. What was the old woman on about? She was breathing heavily again and seemed anxious. I walked over to her. "Are you all right, Mrs Berkeley?" I asked. "Would you like a lift home?" She shook her head and said, "Just to make sure, like. In your hands, please."

The curious obstinacy of old people – there's no cure for it.

"If that's what you'd prefer, Mrs Berkeley, then I'll come by in the morning and pick it up from you myself."

She nodded, looked relieved. I noted her address in my pocketbook and went on my way – to the sea, before we lost the sun.

A few months after this encounter with Mrs Berkeley, I was informed of her death. She was right, after all – her end had been near on that day in the churchyard. I had my secretary bring the will and the small mahogany box, immaculately red and shiny, to my office. A cross had been carved into the top of the box, though rather clumsily to my eye.

There were only two people to be contacted: Mrs Berkeley's sister, who had anyway called me with the news, and her son, who – as the will made clear now that I read it over again – I would meet at the funeral. We would no doubt have a few moments together afterwards to arrange a suitable day for the reading. Her request was odd but not uncommon. I was aware of course that I had no legal right to open the box and so pushed it to one side. I couldn't possibly be interested in its contents, and, anyway, I was about to set off for a late lunch appointment with an important client.

I returned to my office several hours later, after good business, a bit too light-headed. I couldn't drive home and so decided that I would call a taxi. My colleagues had left for the day; I could hear the cleaner putting away the vacuum. I read the few messages left for me by my secretary and then, unusually for me, fell asleep in my chair. An hour later I was woken up by the phone ringing. It was my wife. Dinner was nearly ready – what on earth was I doing? I stood up to go, intending to walk the two miles home to clear my head, but accidentally knocked Mrs Berkeley's blasted box off the edge of my desk. The catch must have loosened – as I picked up the box the lid swung free and everything inside tumbled out on to the carpet. I stood there looking down on what appeared to be a collection of Mrs Berkeley's memorabilia: bits and pieces of junk, as far as I could tell, though no doubt of some sentimental value.

As I picked up the items, one by one, and put them back in the box, I wondered if my wife also had a box for such family keepsakes: a lock of curly blond hair tied with a blue ribbon; a birth certificate; a framed photograph of a baby boy, also with curly blond hair, wearing a gold crucifix on a long gold chain; the crucifix and chain themselves; and several other items of sentimental value. Lastly, I picked up three notebooks, all with hard black covers, now rather dulled and scratched, and bound together with several elastic bands. I sat down, rolled the bands away, and flicked through the topmost notebook. It had been used as a diary, I saw straightaway from the carefully penned-in dates, although the entries were sporadic, the dates sometimes months apart. I swear I would never have touched her diaries if it hadn't been for this accident, but against my better judgement – I'd never done such a thing before and will never do it again – I began reading, at random, Mrs Berkeley's thoughts. There was something inane but also, well, how should I put it, something ... nonetheless curiously affecting about them.

My darling boy, he's a grand one. He makes my heart smile with joy. Has there ever been a boy as beautiful as him. Today Alfred came back with a toy, a camel. You should have seen John's face light up. The sickness left him like a lark. Just flew off and never came back. He knows who his mother and father are all right. And he's only six months old. He's a clever lad, my lad.

The usual stuff, I thought, at first: clearly not worth reading – not meant for my eyes anyway. But I read on. Pages and pages along the same lines. You'd have thought the boy was a king, not the son of Mr and Mrs Berkeley. I took up the second volume.

John's done well in school. It's his birthday as well. He's eight today. The teacher said he's doing fine. She expects he'll come top all the way through. He's a clever thing. I don't know where he gets it all from. Can he talk! You can't keep him quiet at dinner. He'll tell us all sorts. Alfred said he must have inherited his brains from his father. I said, You know nowt, Alfred, except where the pub is! Aye, Alfred said, best discovery I ever made! We were laughing so hard, John got annoyed. Said he couldn't concentrate on his book. Always got his nose in a book. He didn't get that from his father, I can vouch for that. Nor from me, for that matter.

I followed the progress of young John. He passed all his exams in top place, every year, it seemed, and went on to the district's only surviving grammar school. I read about his sporting exploits – captain of the football team, broke the school record for the mile – and his impressive academic record: there wasn't anything he wasn't good at. He was the best in the school – the very best, said his mother – and would have gone to university, but he didn't want to.

John got an office job.

John got an office job – the bank took him on! Has any of the Berkeley's ever worked in an office or anyone on my side! I was ill and John brought me some flowers and chocolates. I knew he had something else on his mind. Said he's thinking about moving out, now that he's got a job. This is your home, I said. I know, I know, he said. But I've got to have some freedom. But you can do anything you like here, I said. We'd never try and stop you coming and going as you like. He didn't say anything to that. I'll get Alfred to have a word with him. He's only eighteen and my only child. I couldn't bear to lose him so early.

I skipped a few pages.

Alfred and I went to John's flat. Why he wants to live here I don't know. He's got it a right pig-sty. And what he eats! Come home, son, I told him. I'll cook for you and look after you like I've always done. No persuading him. I come home every Sunday, Mam, and I'm only a mile away, not in Brazil or anywhere else, he tells me. Well, I suppose I'll just have to accept it. I didn't want to say anything but there was some lipstick in the bathroom. I said it anyway: Have you got yourself a woman, John? Well, Mam, as a matter of fact I have, he says. As if I would mind. Julie's her name. I told him to bring her round next Sunday, this Julie, so I can have a good look at her.

Why on earth was I reading all this? It rambled on, seemingly going nowhere, but always came back to John: John did this, John did that, John went there, John said such-and-such. At last, it rambled in a definite direction: John and Julie had become like peas in a pod. They even went on holiday together – abroad. For the rest, Alfred had been ill but was now recovering. Mrs Berkeley's sister paid a visit, the first in years. Mrs Berkeley's sister lived in Kent, which was at the ends of the earth, as far as Mrs Berkeley was concerned. And then John married Julie.

I says to him before they went off, you don't forget your mother now. Remember who brought you up and who clothed and fed you. Alfred poked his nose in, said I was to leave the lad alone, that Julie was a wonderful girl. I'm not disagreeing, I said, I know she's a wonderful girl. I just don't want him to forget his mother. I won't forget you, John says, how could I? You're my mother – no one else. I suppose they've arrived in Spain now. I wanted to tell them a few things but I reckon they know all about it already. They all do these days, not like Alfred and me when we were married. I hope their room's clean and the food's good.

The phone rang. It was my wife again. My dinner was spoiling. Yes, yes, I'm sorry, I've just finished up. I'm coming straight back. I rang for a taxi and went home.

The next day I closed the door to my office and read some more of Mrs Berkeley's diary. John and Julie became parents to two children – a girl and a boy – and John was promoted again at the bank. He was doing just fine. Has there ever been a happier couple and such lovely children? And he never forgets his mother, especially now that Alfred has died. He always comes round with the bairns on a Sunday. Mrs Berkeley had even had a telephone installed, on John's prompting, and John was always ringing to see how she was. But then there was a crisis.

They've made him a manager. My son a bank manager! He's upset me though. They gave him two options but he took the farther one. Nothing's good enough for them these days. He says it's only fifty miles away not Australia or anything. Says his job depends on it and it's a good place to live with good schools too. And Julie doesn't mind moving either, he says. She's a lovely wife, I'm not denying it, but once upon a time her opinion wouldn't have counted against mine. Says I can come and stay whenever I like and that he'll still come on Sundays. But I know he won't.

I could see Mrs Berkeley's point but I was on Julie's side. He'd done well for himself, this John. I couldn't help feeling he would have made a good lawyer or diplomat, what with all the obvious disagreements between wife and mother, supporting his wife on the one hand, soothing his mother on

the other, taking the course that would be best for them all, while all the time the daughter-in-law would assert her rights against the mother, and the mother make a meal of the imaginary problems she always blamed on the daughter: the old story told a million times before. Yes, I could see that the Mrs Berkeley of the diary was the same as the old woman who used to bustle past me in the supermarket, with a curt nod and suspicious eyes. I felt only slightly sorry for Mrs Berkeley, and suspected that Julie would have been as amused and exasperated by her as I had been.

The rest of the last notebook, which covered about ten years (she'd not been a particularly assiduous diarist), charted the slow drift of her son's life into a prosperous and settled middle-age: a successful family man and respected member of the local community, albeit one fifty miles from the mother. Through it all he had remained a faithful and loving son. Mrs Berkeley adored her growing grandchildren and they adored her. Even Julie, sensing that she had at last won the tussle with Mrs Berkeley, now tolerated her mother-in-law with amused affection and understanding. Reading between the lines, I conjectured that the two women had at last become good friends, though I couldn't imagine them openly admitting it to each other. A page fell out of the notebook and drifted down to the floor. I picked it up. Magazine text. Something about a recipe for a pudding. The recipe was incomplete, the picture of steaming pudding smothered in chocolate sauce torn in half. I turned over the page. It wasn't the recipe that Mrs Berkeley had cut out of the magazine. There was a picture of a family of four. A father with his hand on his teenage daughter's shoulder, and next to them the mother with her arm around the teenage son. They were a very good-looking family, in the conventional clean-cut sense. They seemed to be modelling thick woollen jumpers. Underneath the picture there was written, in the black ink of Mrs Berkeley's careful hand: John, Julie, Chris and Theresa. Puzzled, I studied the faces. No answers came from the happy smiles – magazine smiles. They seemed locked into someone's dream of an idyllic existence. I went back to the diary and searched it for any mention that John and his family had posed for an advertisement. These things happen, usually by chance – a family spotted on the street one day and then a contract for a shoot or two. Nothing serious or permanent. But there was nothing. Mrs Berkeley hadn't written a word about it. I laid the picture on my desk and read to the end of the diary. It soon became a tale of Mrs Berkeley's failing health. She was convinced she'd had it with this life. And then, on the last page, came this:

I must give the box to the solicitor. He has my instructions already. You've been a good son, John, a very good son. You've always loved your mother. You've never once let me down or broken my heart. You've made me the happiest mother and grandmother in the world. Alfred, bless his soul, was never quite convinced. He didn't believe, really, when you come down to it. I told him it would be all right, that he was to leave everything to me. I'm done for, son, and now you've got to stand on your own two feet. Your mother can't help you anymore. And that breaks my heart.

That was it. The final page was dated the day I spoke to Mrs Berkeley in the churchyard, just before I took the box from her. She knew then that she was finished.

I was curious to meet John and his family, why I couldn't say, there couldn't have been a more ordinary family. Blandly happy, just like me I suppose. I was glad that things had gone well for them, sorry they had lost their mother and grandmother. There had been no great disasters in the fifty years covered in the diaries, no great adventures either, unless life – simply breathing and seeing and living – was itself the great adventure. I couldn't, of course, tell John what I'd done. At the funeral in three days' time I would speak to him as if I knew nothing whatsoever about them, apart from the one or two facts his mother would inevitably have told me over the course of our acquaintance. I felt awful about it, but strangely relieved. I stretched the elastic bands, wrapped them back around the notebooks, carefully placed them underneath the rest of the keepsakes, and snapped the box shut. No one would ever know. Please forgive me, Mrs Berkeley, I said under my breath before going out to lunch.

That afternoon I called the priest, told him of Mrs Berkeley's wishes and arranged for him to place the box in the coffin in the chapel of rest, just before the lid was finally screwed down. The priest said he'd see to it. Neither of us spoke about what might be in the box. "There's no accounting," he said, "for what the dead want to take with them on their journey." "We're just like the Egyptians," I told the priest, "pagans beneath it all." He laughed at that. He was a bit of a liberal, was our priest.

There wasn't any need for me to go to the funeral, but I'd made it a long-standing habit with my clients. What's more, I discovered before leaving for the church that I'd quite forgotten to put the magazine picture of the family back in the box. I was obliged, I felt – according to Mrs Berkeley's wishes and

after what I'd done – to place the picture in the grave, right at the end, at the very least. So I folded the picture and slipped it into my inside pocket.

In the event, I didn't make it to the church in time – an important client had rung and I had to take the call. I sat outside the church in my car waiting for the congregation to emerge and then followed the cortege to the cemetery a few hundred yards away. It was a dazzling morning, the sun pouring itself down on to the mourners. The priest said his last words, while I stood back and shielded my eyes to scan the silhouettes standing round the open grave: I was looking for John and his family. Is it him there? I asked myself. Or perhaps that one? Is she Julie? Where are the children? Of course they wouldn't be children any more but young adults, older than my own. The mourners dispersed, leaving only one elderly lady standing by the grave. I approached her and uttered some pleasantries or other about its being a shame.

Mrs Berkeley's sister introduced herself. "I haven't seen her enough," she said, "in the last few years. I live at the other end of the country, in Kent, or the ends of the earth, as my sister liked to put it. You always want to visit, but you always leave it till it's too late. She'd not even bothered to tell me she was seriously ill."

"What day would be best for you to discuss the will?" I asked. "And for Mr Berkeley?"

"Mr Berkeley? Her husband is dead, Mr Wallace," she said.

"I meant her son."

Mrs Berkeley's sister looked at me in silence.

"She doesn't have a son, Mr Wallace," she said at last.

I gazed at her, confused.

"Did she tell you she had a son?" she asked.

"Well, yes, she mentioned him – once or twice," I said, feeling as if I'd known Mrs Berkeley's son a long time – a very long time.

She stared at me, as though she were staring at a fool.

"And she's left most of what she has to him in her will," I added, clinching the point.

"Come with me, Mr Wallace," she said.

I followed her silently through the rows of stones to a far corner of the graveyard, a damp and sunless corner.

She stopped by an old stone, its whiteness turned green by moss.

"There's her son, Mr Wallace. The only one she ever had. She wasn't capable of having another after him. Her womb – it had to be removed."

I read the inscription.

John Charles Berkeley

Beloved Son of Alfred and Eileen Berkeley

Died 29th March 1963

Aged 6 months

Lord Have Mercy On His Soul

“He was a lovely baby, Mr Wallace, but he never had his life. Flu. It broke her heart.”

I think she went on to tell me something else about her sister, but I was no longer listening. I scanned the graveyard, half expecting the shade of John to come striding towards us through the morning light, vainly hoping that he himself would contradict the undeniable evidence before me.

I kept the picture of John and his family. At quiet moments in the office, I sometimes take it out and study it for a while, and tell myself that Mrs Berkeley’s sister was quite wrong: John had his life, after all. The mother made sure of that.

April 23rd

Peter Ryley

It was theatre. Never film or TV, not even books, theatre. Even though it meant going out. It wrapped her in thoughts. It calmed her and fired her imagination. It took her to another world, out of the one that tired her. Eight stops on the underground and she was there.

She would go to see a play when she could, often on impulse, when she felt brave enough. It had to be a matinée and she had to be home before dark. There was one day every year that she would always go: April 23rd. Her day.

Today, she was going to see *King Lear*. Dark, complex, violent, filled with paranoia and suspicion. The work of a mature mind. She hadn't seen it for thirty – nearly forty – years. She couldn't. The last time she did, it had happened. Right after. It. The it that had changed everything. The it that made her tremble outside, outside everywhere, except in the theatre, where she could dream.

Lear was the production that fell on April 23rd this year, and she knew she had to go, despite it. She got to the theatre without too much stress. Once inside, she was calm and secure, she only had to endure the journey home. A short ride on the tube and a ten-minute walk from the station and she would be back inside her happy, generous house, with its walls covered with framed playbills and family photos.

"Be brave," she told herself. "It wasn't the play. It was a coincidence."

She was pleased she went. Maybe, it was fading away. She loathed the contrived, modern setting, but nothing could spoil the poetry. The play was long, and though it wouldn't be dusk for an hour or two, dark clouds had gathered. The light was gloomy, and the streets were not comforting. People walked a little quicker and the numbers thinned out at the prospect of rain. The automatic streetlights began to come on, while new apartment blocks threw shadows and darkened alleyways. She glanced around her, always wary, never safe until that blue-painted front door. Then she saw him.

"Don't be ridiculous. It's nothing." She told herself, using her adamant, sensible inner voice. But then he moved, moved in time with her, paused when she paused, shrank into the shadows when she looked around. A slim, dark figure, hood pulled low.

"There are times when you are an idiot," she scolded herself, as she lengthened and quickened her stride.

"Think of the play. Why do they have to muck things up? What on earth were they doing when they set it in a shopping centre? Don't directors know that we have imaginations of our own? Do they always have to make it 'relevant'? The relevance is there, in the text, in the dialogue, all you have to do is open yourself up to the meaning."

Her soliloquy continued as she passed the local precinct with its boarded-up units. Was it more menacing than usual? Hard to say. Then:

"He's still there."

She kept glancing over at him, trying to look casual. He wore a bulky coat over his hoodie. That seemed reasonable. Even in London, April is not warm. It disguised him though. He was young, the narrowness of his shoulders gave his age away, despite his clothing. She kept walking, pausing every so often to look. He was always there. She tried speeding up and then slowing down. He kept pace with her always. Should she run?

"Don't be a fool. There is nothing to run from. You would look ridiculous. Besides, at your age; in these shoes? It's all in your mind. It will never happen again, never. This is all innocent. He's not after you."

Why would he be? Get a grip on yourself.

She smiled at her own folly. Her breathing eased and her normal pace resumed. Relaxation smoothed over her tension. She started to think about the theatre and the performances. It was wonderful, in its own way. Regardless of the modern staging, the performances were breath-taking. The actors deserved

their ovation, and she was pleased that she stayed to the last curtain call, even if it made her late and engineering works on the underground meant that she was out longer than she would have liked.

"It was worth it, really worth it ... oh my, he's still there ... there's something in his hand."

A glint of light shone off the object. He raised it to his ear.

"It's just his phone. You silly, silly woman. He's not following you; he's trying to get a signal. Probably wants to talk to his girlfriend. What would he want with a paranoid old woman like you?"

She walked on and glanced around. But he was still there, on the other side of the street, moving in time with her, his phone back in his pocket. She made as if to cross the road and saw him pause. She turned and walked on. He mirrored her actions. She stopped to look in a shop window. He stopped and adjusted his clothing. This was wrong. Something was happening and she didn't know what.

Should she pluck up the courage, walk up to him, confront him? Running away didn't stop it. Pretending that it was nothing didn't stop it.

"Be brave ... be brave. Why be frightened? Act. Perform."

She took a deep breath, her heart pounding.

"Stiffen the sinews, summon up the blood. Resolution will not be sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought."

And at that moment, as she turned to cross the road, the youth walked swiftly beyond her, head down, and he was gone.

"How ridiculous can you get. How unutterably stupid. It was nothing, nothing at all. Just a coincidence. A young person, being a young person when you were walking home. You old fool."

Despite the relief, she longed for the safety of home, a few minutes away round the corner, the small, wrought iron gate and the neglected privet opening onto a tiny front garden with steps leading to her door. How she wanted it. Home. The safety of home.

She turned the corner into her street, looked ahead for the familiar sight, and ...

"It's him. There are two others with him. A boy and a girl. All hooded.

They are standing in front of my house. A coincidence? Youngsters hanging around? Don't hesitate, walk up to them. It's your house. They're not moving. Who are they? What do they want? They're looking at me. I can't see them properly. They're moving towards me. They're holding something. It's me they want! It's me! Me!"

All three threw off their hoods.

"Surprise! Happy birthday Gran."

"Gran?"

"Gran!"

"Are you OK, Gran?"

"Gran?"

Her vision was clouded. Images swirled. She felt dizzy, nauseous. As her breathing faltered, she strained her eyes and saw the anxious, frightened faces of three of the people she loved most in the world. She tried to speak. Only one word came out.

"Shakespeare."

El Otro Lado

Edward Hagelstein

Like the loggerhead turtle, the Espinal brothers returned to the beach every year, although their timing differed and the brothers came to cook, rather than lay, eggs. The Espinals worked the early tourist season and by December were ready to go home for Christmas.

About this same time Lonnie and I had been partnered at work for a little over three years, by choice. We weren't alike. He was a cane-country cracker from Clewiston. I was Miami by birth. 305 'til I die, as some say.

We gravitated toward each other because we operated the same. We liked finding people who didn't want that. The cops have a name for it: collar guys. We weren't cops so there was no name for us. We didn't encourage repeat customers, but the Espinals had an ongoing thing for Miami Beach and so did we.

If by mid-December if we hadn't stumbled onto the Espinals in whatever kitchen they were working Lonnie and I might be driving down Collins, or more likely Washington Avenue and might spot one of the brothers loitering on the sidewalk, almost as if he were summoning us.

Lonnie and I often, after too much Cuban coffee, would regretfully resort to mystical terms to explain how we came to encounter certain people. It's difficult to rationalize blind luck, but we tried. Sheer determination, pattern recognition, and good leads also played a part in our success.

When we spotted an Espinal we would jump out and dutifully sack him up and amid a little conversation he'd let us know, handcuffed in the back seat, where the other two brothers were working, or if they were off that day, whatever moldy studio apartment they were holed up in. We'd respond accordingly, round them up, and head back to the office on 79th Street.

The first year we found the brothers almost by accident. Lonnie was easing down a narrow alley in the low-sun late afternoon lull before dinner and the three of them were lingering in their stained aprons, perched on overturned crates next to a dripping blue dumpster behind a restaurant. We glanced over and alerted on the group like a pair of hunting dogs in the woods. Lonnie stopped the car without a word passing between us.

They must have guessed who we were when we got out and started trying to habla in our fractured academy Spanish, but the brothers were a mellow bunch and didn't run on us. It was only November, but they took it well. We cuffed them all and put them in the back of the car, effectively cleaning out the kitchen staff.

The chef, Italian by birth, stepped outside to watch, but didn't complain, probably hoping we wouldn't come back in a week with an administrative warrant for his employment records. We did anyway.

The Espinal brothers discovered the gift of voluntary departure on that day, which in their case meant they could ask to return to Mexico and in a few days would be on a bus to Brownsville, where they would walk across the border and be back in San Luis Potosi for the holidays with family.

In January they'd make the reverse trip across the border, without the benefit of a bridge, and if they didn't get caught would be back in Miami Beach scrubbing pots and cooking penne later that week.

This was in the days before big beautiful walls and instant fingerprint returns. The revolving door wasn't unusual. Things were looser, not so worrisome. Minus a passport we were never really sure who we had most of the time. Half the cedulae we saw were forged. Without documents you went with the name they gave you. You inked prints on a card and mailed it away when the envelope was full. By the time you got a report back, if ever, you might discover someone improbably named Muncie Espinal-Cuervo had been arrested under eight other names in the last six years.

It was an imperfect system. We worked with it.

By the third year the brothers were so accommodating we didn't bother to cuff them until we got to the office, and that was for show. The other two brothers were the equally improbable Garve Espinal-Cuervo and the almost likely Pasqual Espinal-Cuervo. At least to us that's who they were.

But this story isn't only about the Espinals. They share billing with Lonnie.

Lonnie was married and had a baby girl named Analisa when we started working together. I was a couple of years younger and didn't have any of that. I had the job and night classes at a second-rate commuter law school to occupy my time. I wasn't on fire about any of it though.

We never hung out together outside of work. Lonnie was all about family. I wasn't. We'd be at our adjacent desks and Lonnie might be on the phone with his wife talking about diapers or play dates, I was never sure because I tuned out conversations of that sort. If I was on the phone it was to set up a date of my own – either dinner or study – with a girl from school.

Lonnie lived in an anonymous house and I lived in an unsavory apartment complex. Lonnie enjoyed his family and not being single and I enjoyed whatever it was I had going on. We didn't envy each other.

It wasn't long before the talk of a happy wife and baby turned darker.

I wasn't equipped to dispense marriage or relationship advice, so I didn't. I listened, and that seemed to help Lonnie. After the initial shock of his separation, I listened and asked few questions. I helped him move his clothes, a bed from the guest room and a few other things into his own rundown apartment, the first and only time I'd been in his house.

As the divorce proceeded reality began to sink in – the amount it was going to cost him for the rest of his life between child support and half of his retirement – and the loss of time and intimacy with Analisa, time Lonnie knew he would never recover.

He wasn't the only one in that boat. There were probably two or three others in the office getting divorced at any given time, discreetly or not.

Even though we worked with other people at times due to necessity I don't think Lonnie confided in anyone else about his troubles. I tend to keep things close to the vest myself, so I understood.

“Do you think you could live in Mexico?” Lonnie asked one day when we were eating lunch at the Chinese place across from the office.

“Language-wise?” I said. “It wouldn't be pretty, but I'd get by.”

“In general,” he said. “Just surviving.”

“Maybe in Cancun or something. Be a bartender to the tourists.” I'd tended bar before, although not in another country.

“Is it hard?” he said.

“Bartending? It's mostly personality once you learn the drinks. If you don't know a drink the customer can usually tell you if you're not too proud to ask.”

He mulled this over but I didn't give the conversation much thought at the time.

Our Spanish was improving with daily use and apparently it was the same for the brothers and their English, to the point where we could almost carry on a conversation. We'd arrest hundreds of people throughout the year but they were our only recurring encounters. The last time we picked up the Espinals it was like a reunion. They showed us photos of a couple of kids born in the past year and said they'd been sending money home, so Christmas would be good.

At the office Lonnie wanted to see the pictures of San Luis Potosi and was asking a lot of questions. He seemed happier than he had for months. I attributed it to the upcoming holidays and the opportunity to spend more time with Analisa.

On a rare occasion our boss would get a call from Krome to see if one of us wanted to pick up some overtime by taking a three day bus ride to Brownsville and back. It sounded horrible despite the extra pay so we never did. But the opportunity came up with the bus they were putting the Espinals on and Lonnie took it. I figured he needed the money.

What I heard from the guy who drove the final leg to the border was that Lonnie was last off the bus and decided to accompany the group to the gate where they crossed over. It was pre-dawn and the border wasn't busy. The other guys didn't really pay attention to the fact that Lonnie was carrying his overnight bag.

Lonnie just followed the group through the port into Mexico and kept walking. The guys tried yelling at him and even at the Mexicans to send him back but he never turned around and the sleepy Mexican border guys didn't really know what was happening. They seemed to think he was one of the group, despite being every inch an American country boy.

Back on the bus they found Lonnie's weapon, badge and credentials on the driver's seat.

I got a little heat when they called me to the carpet. The bosses and internal affairs people seemed to think I should know more than I was saying about Lonnie's plan, if it even was a plan. There was the suggestion I could be charged with something if they found out I'd known ahead of time and didn't say anything.

It was typical bullshit. They didn't care about Lonnie or his family, just the potential embarrassment of the unprecedented defection. I didn't say a thing about our previous conversation about living in Mexico. It was none of their business.

When December rolled around again I'd forgotten about our unacknowledged appointment with the Espinals. I didn't work Miami Beach as much. It wasn't the same without Lonnie. But I did roll down Washington Avenue one afternoon and sure enough there was Garve, or maybe Pasqual, in front of a newer Italian restaurant, practically semaphoring me to stop. Or in my view he was. He was actually standing on the sidewalk doing nothing special. I did stop the car to have a chat.

Apparently, once they crossed into Matamoros, Lonnie followed the Espinals to the bus station and onto the bus to San Luis Potosi. They were a circumspect and polite bunch and didn't ask questions. They invited him to their home and told their puzzled family that the officer who amicably arrested them every year decided to accompany them home this time for unknown reasons.

He stayed two days and got along well with the extended family on their little farm. On the third day he thanked everyone for their hospitality and started walking south. That was the last they'd heard of him. Christmas was the next week.

After we'd talked for a few minutes, still haltingly, neither of us was ever going to be fluent in the other's language – in conversation with a Spanish speaker I would still often let the words flow over me and just pluck what I could from the stream - I nodded toward the car and said half-jokingly, "Listo?"

Whichever brother it was looked at the car, then at me and shook his head politely. We both knew the deal. Things had begun to change politically, getting back to the U.S. easily wasn't guaranteed. I shook his hand, we said goodbye, and it felt like the end of an era in many ways.

The atmosphere between management and myself had become mutually chilly after Lonnie's departure. I buckled down at school, graduated, and passed the bar on my first try – much to my surprise, as they say. I burned up my annual leave, gave my notice, rented a cheap office on Biscayne Boulevard and started taking cases.

I hadn't felt the same about the job since Lonnie left. I began to take the view that his departure had given me permission to make my own break. After quite a few late nights sitting on the seawall at the end of my street watching the moonlight refract off Biscayne Bay I decided that maybe it was time I flipped the switch and put a little balance in my career by attempting to help some of the unsettled travelers resolve their status legally. Without sending them home.

Most people in the office, especially my boss, didn't even know what I'd been doing in my spare time and were none too pleased to see me going to the other side, much the same as Lonnie had.

Now when I'm representing anyone from San Luis Potosi I'll show them a photo of Lonnie and ask if they've seen or heard of anyone who might be him. If I'm talking to someone who's been to the so-called Mexican Riviera or other tourist spots I might ask if they ran into any American bartenders. Turns out there are quite a few outcast gringos in Mexico, but none, that I've found yet, who answer to the name of Lonnie.

Lately I've been wondering if maybe Lonnie's ready to come home. One of those notions you get, supported by no evidence, really an unsubstantiated feeling.

I might take a trip down there soon, and for old time's sake, see if I can switch roles again, temporarily, and get a lead on one more person who doesn't want to be found. But if I do, somehow, find Lonnie, I won't force him home, unless he's ready.

The Non-Smoker

June O'Sullivan

Timmy walloped off the doorframe as he swayed in from the porch. He swung in a wide arc to check that he'd shut the front door behind him, then shushed himself.

God, he was wasted!

He'd stayed on in the pub trying to win the card game. It had run on late. He couldn't remember who had won it but a pat of his empty pockets confirmed it was not him. He shook his head to steady his vision and opened the door to the front room. The big light was off, the small reading lamp glowed and the room was warmed by the fire dying in the hearth.

What time was it at all? He scrunched one eye shut to peer at his phone screen. Through the spiderweb cracks he could see it was after one. Mammy was in bed, of course. She always retired once the evening news was finished. He stepped as quietly as he could across the linoleum and reversed onto her armchair to pull off his boots. It was an effort and each one landed more heavily than he intended. He paused for a moment to listen. Had he woken her? There was silence.

He didn't like to disturb Mammy. He felt responsible for her since Daddy died. Two years ago now. He'd even left his job and became her full-time carer, drawing the weekly allowance for it. Timmy Scanlan, the best welder across four counties and here he was now, a carer. Still, it suited him. No more facing the boss with a head on him. A nice bundle into his hand each week at the post office. And, in fairness to Mammy, she was easy to mind.

Had she left his dinner for him? Timmy wondered. He stepped out to the little back kitchen, the cold air of the dark, tiled space an affront after the cosy warmth. He opened the microwave. His dinner was there, plated up, a post-it note stuck to the door telling him how long to nuke it for. He chuckled to himself as he filled a pint glass of milk, then scowled. That busybody, John-Joe, above in the pub, had warned him not to be driving home drunk. Like it was any of his business. Timmy had squared up to him and told him he would drive when and where he liked. Then he pulled a handbrake turn out in the car park to make his point. Now, he swished the yellowing lace curtain to one side to check his car was actually outside in the yard. Everything after the handbrake turn was a blur but sure enough there she was. The old reliable!

He brought the plate into the front room so he could look at the telly and forked the mashed potatoes into his mouth while he flicked up and down the channels trying to find something that wasn't news or sport. The volume was down to the bare minimum. That way if he stumbled on something a bit dirty, a foreign film maybe, he could watch it without waking her.

The door behind him creaked open and on instinct his finger connected with the 'power off' button.

'You don't have to turn that off on my account.'

'Did I wake you?'

Mammy shuffled over to the armchair, her floral nightdress covered by the housecoat she wore by day. It kept her outfit clean for when she went down to the church to light a candle or say a few prayers.

'I heard the car,' she fixed him with a hard look. 'Had you much to drink?'

'No,' he kept his eyes on his plate, scraping the last small mound of beans onto the mash before forking the lot into his mouth. 'There was a game of cards. It kept me late.'

He slid the emptied plate away and took a gulp of milk. He could feel the combination starting to curdle with the feed of cider in the pit of his belly. He pulled a deep suck of air in through his nostrils to settle it down. He didn't want to throw up in front of Mammy. She'd be fussing over him for days after. The air entered his nose along with something recognisable to him but unfamiliar to this house. Cigarette smoke. Timmy had never been a smoker. He couldn't figure out why someone waste their hard-earned money on such a bad habit and half of it going to the government in taxes. His father was never a smoker either. He liked a few pints of a night but hated 'them dirty fags' as he always called them.

'Had you visitors?' Timmy asked his mother.

'Not a sinner.'

She stood up to clear the plate from before him. As she leaned across him to swipe at the crumbs of mash he'd left in his wake he smelled it as clear as day. Fresh cigarette smoke. His eyes were drawn to the square pocket on the front of her housecoat. The outline of a small box was visible.

'Mammy!' The shock in his voice was genuine. 'You've been smoking!'

She froze a moment, her hand betraying her by seeking to cover the pocket. Then she put the plate back down again, sank into the chair beside him and covered her face with her hands.

'May God forgive me. Your father must be spinning in his grave. It was a habit he could never abide. Especially in a woman.'

'When did you decide to take this up? Wouldn't you think you'd have more sense at your age?'

'Ah, Timmy. Go easy on me. Sure you're not in much of a position to judge and you hanging off the chair half-cut.' Her smile sugared the sting of the words. She wasn't cross with him, only teasing. 'This might sound strange but they're company for me. The nights are long and lonely here since your father passed,' she blessed herself. 'It's something to do. And it keeps my hands busy.'

'You could knit.'

'Knitting! I've enough of that done.'

'So, you're only at this since Daddy died?'

'Well, I used to have the odd one when I was younger. 'OP's' we used to call them. 'Other People's'. I never chanced having a packet around the house in case your father found it. He'd have cut the housekeeping money. For starters. And when we'd be out at a dance or something, if someone offered one he'd answer for me and say 'she doesn't smoke' and my tongue would be hanging out of my mouth for the want of it.'

She laughed softly at the memory of her younger self. Timmy was appalled. Who was this woman his mother was describing? Sneaking behind her husband's back and hankering after forbidden vices?

'He kept a tight reign. But now that he's gone,' she lowered her voice to a whisper. 'I have an odd one in the bedroom. Not every night now mind.'

Jesus! In the bedroom? Timmy shook his head. An old TV ad popped into his mind. A heavy cut-glass ashtray with a smouldering cigarette, balanced on an armrest, teetering, then falling.

'You won't be happy until we're roasted alive in our beds,' he banged his fist on the table. His words fell heavy into a long silence. She stood up and lifted his plate.

'I can look after myself. Don't be worrying.'

She disappeared out to the kitchen again and he could hear her scraping at the leftovers. He rubbed his hand across his eyes. No, she was wrong. He was meant to be looking after her. He was her carer after all. She shuffled back in and poked at the dying embers in the hearth.

'Go on away to bed now, Timmy. I'll lock up.'

He staggered the couple of steps to his room, muttering 'goodnight' before his head hit the pillow.

He woke cursing the daylight that pulled him from his sleep. His body was tired, his head was pounding and he felt he could easily do another three or four hours in the scratcher. But he was parched with the thirst and there was something important niggling at the edges of his mind. Something he needed to deal with. What was it? Then he remembered. Mammy and the smoking. God almighty! He'd have to talk to her again about that. Smoking in the bedroom to make matters worse! Not only was it dangerous

it was downright disgusting. He hawked a glob of phlegm from the recess of his throat and opened the window to release it into the yard.

Mammy was just coming in from the clothes line, her hands red from the biting wind as Timmy parked his backside in front of the fire and thought about how he'd broach the subject. His father peered down at him from the memorial card tucked into the frame of the Sacred Heart picture. He had kept a tight reign. On Timmy as well as Mammy. He had been an old man when Timmy, a late surprise to his parents, was born, and he had his ways that were fixed in place by old-fashioned thinking, hard living and bad times. A memory came to Timmy of his father on a Friday evening, suited and booted and ready for his few pints, counting out the housekeeping money from his wage packet. He thumb-licked the notes from the bundle and laid them on the table. His mother, a younger version of her, leaned in to take them but his father raised a hand to stop her.

'Hang on.'

He slid a note out of the pile and carefully folded it back into his wad before securing it in the inside pocket of his jacket.

'John? Sure that's not enough.'

Timmy could hear her adding up the coming week's bills under her breath.

'And twenty makes eighty. You're leaving me short there.'

'Is that so, Maureen?' His father rocked back on his heels, his hands in his pockets.

He reminded Timmy of the TV detective he liked to watch. The funny French lad who twiddled his moustache when he was about to reveal the murderer. His big moment.

'Well, you may think on that next time you decide to drink Babycham all night at the social. One or two would have done you. Those things don't come cheap. And now there's consequences.'

That was a favourite word of his father's. There were always consequences, especially for anything fun.

He remembered his mother raising her chin, as if to argue back, then swallowing her words back down and nodding. She slid the notes into her apron pocket and retreated to the back kitchen to finish the wash-up. His father looked into the mirror above the fireplace, adjusted his shirt collar and patted Timmy on the head.

'Let that be a lesson to you as well, lad.'

Timmy's heart softened now. Sure, who was he to judge? Wasn't Mammy entitled to a bit of pleasure at this stage of her life? After everything she had to put up with. His spirits lifted. He liked this sense of himself being magnanimous, compassionate, caring.

'Mammy,' he called out to the kitchen.

'What?'

'I'll be going up to the shop in a bit. Will I get you some fags?'

She came into the room, drying her chapped hands on a rough-looking towel.

'What are you saying to me?'

'Are you alright for cigarettes? Or will I get you some when I go up to the shop?'

She stopped the drying and tilted her head to one side as if amused by some new trick he was showing her. 'Timmy Scanlan, you're losing it I'd say. Don't you know well I don't smoke. Never have. Never will.'

She reached up to straighten her husband's memorial card, then left the room.

Their Natural State

Daniel Addercouth

Steve wasn't sure if he'd still know Carol after all these years, but he recognises her as soon as she opens the door. There are wrinkles at the corners of her eyes, and the grey around her scalp suggests she dyes her hair, but otherwise she hasn't changed much since he last saw her.

Carol's mouth falls open. "Steven!"

"Call me Steve. Everyone does these days."

"What on earth are you doing in Califer?"

"I thought it was time to pay the old place a visit."

"After 22 years?"

"I've been busy." He gives her a grin. "Aren't you going to invite me in? I'm getting blown away out here."

They sit in her kitchen and drink tea, which Carol makes in the same brown teapot her mother used. She serves him a piece of home-made apple cake on an old china plate that he recognises, and he remembers the long wooden table with its notches and scars from his visits as a teenager. The fire is on and the room feels cosy after his walk along the beach from the caravan site, with the biting wind coming off the sea.

"So what are you doing here?"

Steve takes a sip of his tea. "I'm taking part in the dune conservation project. I had some time off between consulting jobs and wanted to do some voluntary work."

"Huh. And are you still living in Brighton?"

"No, Sheffield. I've moved around a lot. And you? What are you doing with yourself these days?"

"I'm a district nurse. I changed courses after first year. I decided I wanted to work with people instead of being stuck in a lab all day. I go around visiting the old folk. It's very satisfying."

Steve looks around the room, trying to see what's changed. "How's your mother?"

"She passed away. Five years ago."

"I'm sorry." He feels a twinge of guilt for not staying in touch. Carol's mother was always kind to him.

"That's OK." She looks at the sofa next to the fireplace. "My sister's still around. She lives in Tulloch now. What about your parents? Didn't they move to Edinburgh?"

"Yes. To be closer to my sister. I should go and visit. I haven't seen them in a while." Carol's smiling.

"What's funny?" he asks.

"You sound so English."

“I lost my Scottish accent along the way.”

Carol looks him in the eye. “Why did you never come back to visit?”

Steve runs his finger along the handle of his teacup. “I was busy with uni, and then my parents moved away. I felt bad that I never returned.” He takes another bite of cake. “It’s nice to be here.”

Back at the caravan, Steve makes himself some pasta. They didn’t have any tomato sauce at the village Co-op, which Steve thinks is ridiculous (his local Sainsbury’s has at least 20 different kinds), so he has it with grated cheese and some olive oil that a previous tenant left. The wind has got up again, and the caravan rocks with the gusts. He tries to connect to the wi-fi to see if his clients have got in touch, but it’s not working.

He wonders if he’s made a mistake coming here. Ever since he turned 40, he’s wanted to return to Califer, but now he remembers why he left. He overheard two old biddies gossiping about someone in the Co-op. That was what it was like living here. Everyone wanting to know your business.

As he eats his pasta, he flicks through the brochures that have been left in the caravan, which feature local attractions. Califer now has a fishing heritage museum and a company offering dolphin-watching boat tours. None of that existed when he lived here. Everyone’s trying to attract tourists these days.

His mind keeps turning back to Carol. He tries to remember the last time they met before he left. He thinks they went for a walk along the beach, past the sand dunes that he’s here to work on. They agreed to break up because he was leaving for university and she still had another year of school. It was very amicable. At least, that’s how Steve remembers it.

The head of the conservation project is a Forestry and Land Scotland employee called Mike, who is at least 10 years younger than Steve but has an unchallenged air of authority. The other volunteers are a mixture of students on holiday and locals with time on their hands.

They huddle around Mike on the dune slope, straining to hear him above the wind. He explains that the aim of the project is to clear the dunes of trees. “Aren’t trees a good thing?” someone asks. “Don’t they stabilise the dunes?”

Mike laughs. “That’s what they believed when they planted these Sitka spruce back in the nineties. They thought the trees’ root systems would protect the dunes from erosion. Now we have a better understanding of these dune systems and their cycles. We want to restore the dunes to their natural state so they can migrate like they’re supposed to.”

“I remember our class helped to plant these trees when I was a teenager,” Steve says. “It’s ironic we’re getting rid of them now.”

The woman next to Steve looks at him curiously. “I didn’t realise you were from here. You don’t sound local.”

“I’ve been away a long time,” Steve says. “But it’s good to be back.”

Mike divides up the tasks. As the only person with a chainsaw licence, he’s in charge of felling the trees. The two male students are given the job of sawing the trees into sections and transporting them to the site where they’re going to build a bonfire. Steve and Flora, a geography student from Aberdeen, are given a mattock and shovel and tasked with digging up the roots. The others will work on removing the broom and other “invasive species,” as Mike puts it.

Steve is enjoying being out in the open air instead of sitting in his home office, even if the constant wind blows sand in their faces. It's a lovely day for the north of Scotland. Wispy clouds straggle across the cerulean sky. He never appreciated the natural landscape when he was growing up, but after years in cities he can see the attraction.

He thinks again about his last walk with Carol. He tries to remember how the sand dunes looked then, when the trees were just saplings, but the memories are elusive.

After they finish work for the day, Steve pops round to see Carol. She answers the door still wearing her health visitor's uniform, with a wool cardigan draped over her V-necked blue shirt.

"Sorry, I don't have much time," she says. "I've got my book group later."

"Not even for a quick cup of tea?"

Carol rolls her eyes. "You'd better come in."

Steve lowers himself into a chair at the kitchen table. His lower back aches after all the digging, and he can barely move his arms. Carol makes tea and butters a scone for him. "I baked them for the book group, but they won't miss one."

She asks him how the conservation project is going. Steve explains they're removing the Sitka spruce.

"The ones we planted when we were at school."

"I don't remember that."

"You helped with the planting. I remember it clearly."

"You must be thinking of someone else."

Steve thinks about how good Carol looks for her age. Like him, she's put on a bit of weight, but it suits her — she was always too bony. When she smiles, her eyes still light up in that way that once made him fall in love with her.

As he sips his tea, he glances at the corridor leading to the bedrooms. He thinks about the night they spent in the double bed when Carol's mother went away for the weekend. Carol notices him looking, and he averts his gaze.

She asks him about his life, and he tells her about his IT business and the house he's renting in Sheffield from an architect who's on a year's sabbatical in Australia. As he talks, he wonders what it would be like to have your own place like Carol does, full of your own possessions instead of someone else's stuff. He gestures at a gnarled piece of driftwood on the mantelpiece.

"That's nice."

"Found it on the beach. I think it's a root from one of your famous Sitka spruce."

There's a lull in the conversation and they smile at each other. Steve thinks how easily he could get used to visiting Carol. It's like the intervening years never happened.

"I should get ready," Carol says. "Let me give you my number. Then you can text before you come round. Give me a bit of warning."

"I'd rather be spontaneous," Steve says. But they exchange numbers nevertheless.

Steve and Flora take turns digging around the roots with the shovel and hacking off bits with the mattock until they can leverage the stump out of the hole. They've made good progress. It's satisfying to think he's helping to restore things to their natural state.

They stop for a breather and watch the waves breaking on the beach below. Steve's back is drenched in sweat and he takes off his fleece. He realises he hasn't thought about his clients all morning. Being outside in nature must be doing him good. "Could you imagine living somewhere like this?" he asks Flora.

Flora snorts. "It would drive me crazy. There's only one pub, for God's sake."

Flora goes to make a phone call, and Steve takes the opportunity to text Carol. *Mind if I pop round later?*

The reply comes almost immediately. *I'm visiting my sister, Tuesdays are our night. But how about dinner tomorrow?*

Sounds lovely, he responds. *I'll bring the wine.*

Steve stops by the caravan to take a shower before going over to Carol's. He wishes he'd brought some nice clothes with him instead of just jeans and sweaters, but at least he can freshen up. As he stands under the lukewarm spray, rubbing between his toes to get the sand out, he imagines what it would be like to move back. He could rent a cottage here for a lot less than what he pays in Sheffield, and with his consulting business he can work from anywhere. He could think about buying a place, have a house full of his own things like Carol does. He might even move in with her. The thought sends a frisson of excitement through him.

Steve hands Carol the bottle of wine. "I'm afraid this was all they had at the Co-op."

Carol examines the label. "Ooh, their fancy one. You splashed out. And you remembered I like red."

The steak pie tastes familiar, with its flaky crust and tender filling. When he checks, Carol confirms it's her mother's recipe. He takes a second helping of her home-made sticky toffee pudding, even though he's already stuffed. After they finish eating, they move to the sofa by the fireplace. Carol tops up Steve's wine glass. They're happy to sit and stare into the fire. It feels like no time has passed since they were teenagers sitting on this same sofa. It's so warm in the cottage that Steve feels sleepy.

He stretches out an arm and places it behind Carol. He touches the back of her neck gently, the way she used to like it.

Carol removes his hand and places it next to his leg, then shifts a few inches away from him.

"Steven, you can't just turn up after 22 years and pick up like nothing's happened. I'm not ready for this."

"I'm sorry."

"It's OK." Carol smiles at him. "It's really nice to see you, but I need to take things slowly." She checks her watch. "Listen, I have to get to bed. Early start tomorrow."

The next day, Steve texts Carol when he's on his break. *Sorry about last night. It was the wine and good company.* He can see that she's read it, but she doesn't reply.

Mike is delighted with their progress. “We’ve done a lot towards restoring these dunes to their natural state. You should be pleased with yourselves.” He suggests going for a drink at the village pub the next day to mark the end of the project. Several of the volunteers say they’ll come.

Later, Mike checks how Flora and Steve are getting on and thanks them personally. “We’ll be doing another week next month if you’re around. We could use an extra pair of hands.”

Steve is about to say he needs to get back down south, he has a new project starting the next week, but then he wonders what it would be like to extend his stay. He’s managed to fix the caravan’s wi-fi, he could work from here for a bit. Spend more time with Carol. “Let’s stay in touch on that.”

Steve’s in the caravan, wondering if he can be bothered making dinner, when a knock on the door makes him jump.

It’s Carol. “Hey.”

“Want to come in?”

She shakes her head. “I just wanted to say sorry about last night.”

“It’s me that should apologise.”

She smiles. “Maybe we can have another go at dinner. Do you want to come over Saturday evening? I promise I won’t kick you out again.”

“I’m leaving on Saturday morning. How about tonight?”

“Sorry, I’ve got a hall committee meeting. But you could come over tomorrow?”

Steve considers the meet-up in the pub with the other volunteers, then decides he’d rather see Carol.

“That would be nice.”

“Great.” She eyes the decrepit caravan. “You can stay over in the guest room if you like. It’ll be more comfortable than this thing.”

Steve nods, unsure what kind of offer she’s making.

“Oh, I brought you a present.” She blushes and for a moment looks exactly like the teenage girl he used to know. She reaches into her bag and hands him a piece of driftwood like the one he admired at her cottage.

“This is beautiful. Thank you.”

“I found it this morning. It’ll remind you of home.” She looks at her watch. “Sorry, I need to get going.”

She pulls him in for a hug and he feels the warmth of her body against his. “I missed you,” she whispers.

She lets go and stands back. “See you tomorrow.”

He watches as she gets into her car and drives off. He wonders how she knew which caravan was his.

Steve has been sleeping surprisingly well in the caravan, but a storm gets up in the night and wakes him. The wind howls around the caravan, pushing it back and forth. He’s too warm under the heavy duvet and kicks it off.

When he switches on the light, the first thing he sees is the piece of driftwood sitting on the cupboard.

He wonders where he'll put it when he gets home. It won't fit amid the shiny metal surfaces in the architect's house. He thinks about how some people like filling their homes with knick-knacks. That's not his style.

It's so stuffy in the caravan, Steve feels like he's suffocating. He gets up and cracks open a window.

The wind blows in and he shuts it again. Huge raindrops batter against the pane. It's so dark he can't make out anything apart from distant lights in the other caravans. He thinks about the dunes they've cleared. Now the sand's free to move.

He wonders again what it would be like to live here. Walks on the beach. Shopping at the Co-op. Visiting Carol in her cottage that makes him drowsy. Maybe even sharing the double bed that used to be her parents'. He thinks about Carol with her book group, her Tuesday visits to her sister, her hall committee meetings. She clearly likes being part of the community and having her routines, with everything cosy and familiar. He thinks about how warm her body felt when they hugged. They could have a nice life together.

But as he watches the rain, he feels the same pressure in his chest that he did as a teenager before he left the village, as if his clothing is too tight.

Steve checks the car clock. He's making good time. He'll get to Sheffield by late afternoon. He texted Mike before he left to say that something had come up, apologising for missing the last day. Then he cleaned up the caravan kitchen, returned the key to the key safe, and drove off. He left the driftwood on the cupboard in the bedroom. He thought it looked better there than it would in his place.

He switches off his phone. It'll probably be hours before Carol texts to ask where he is, but best to be on the safe side. He'll text her later to say he needed to work. No one ever questions that.

A sign announces the turn-off for Edinburgh. Steve's tempted. He could drop in and visit his parents. They'd be pleased to see him. He could even spend the night, try to see his sister. But then he thinks about their overheated living room that stinks of his father's cigarettes, the questions about when he's planning to move back to Scotland and has he met anyone yet.

When the junction comes up, he keeps going.

He decides to visit Hebden Bridge on the way to Sheffield. He's heard it's nice.

It might be a good place to try next.

Last Supper

Jayson Carcione

He slices the aubergine into such beautiful half-moons that they are a work of art – and he says so to his wife. “You know, it’s something the surrealists would dream up. Just look, it’s even like the marzipan in the sweet shops of Taormina. Do you remember how we thought they were real pieces of fruit? So beautiful, it doesn’t look real.”

His wife nods and drowns him out with another sip of Chablis. She prefers the aubergine cut into meaty rounds, but she isn’t going to quibble about his mother’s recipe. Not tonight of all nights. Their daughter is coming home. “Beautiful, Sal, just beautiful. I’m sure Mia will love it.” She stands at the window glass in hand, smartphone pressed between her shoulder and ear. She is waiting to speak with reception.

She grinds her teeth as the hold music starts its insipid loop once again.

Sal is stirring the sauce and salting the beautiful half-moon slices of aubergine. He takes a swig of IPA and twists his lips. It has gone warm. He looks at his wife. Her back is turned to him, her face to the window, but he sees the tension rise in her stiffening shoulders, the crook of her head. He wants to kiss the back of her swan-like neck, but he knows she will wince at the intrusion. He sees through her, through the window. He sees what she sees. Outside, the snow falls. Soon the Manhattan skyline will be invisible behind a veil of white and they’ll be lucky to see the East River and Hellgate bridge. His wife places her open palm against the glass of the window. She thinks everything is beautiful in the snow.

He stirs the sauce and brings it to his lips. He tosses in a teaspoon of sugar, another dash of salt. “You know, Gina. If it was something serious, you wouldn’t be on hold.”

Gina puts down her glass on the cushioned windowsill. She would lose herself in the snow if she could, like when she was little and there seemed to be snow every day of winter. She swipes the smartphone, drops it next to the empty glass, and presses her forehead against the window. Her hair is as white as the falling snow. Sal is ignoring her now, he’s too busy grating a hefty slab of parmigiano reggiano. Soon, he will turn his attention to the slab of pecorino next to it. That was always one of his mother’s tricks, some light shavings of pecorino mixed in with the parm. He stops and shakes out the pins and needles from his hands. When did grating cheese become a younger man’s job?

Now Gina is watching him. Sometimes she can’t bear the sight of him, but she likes when he is busy in the kitchen. He is cheerful and content, the master of all. When he is in the kitchen, his confidence is overwhelming, just like when he was her lecturer, and she was a fresher girl all those years ago. She looks back at the abandoned phone on the windowsill. The empty wine glass calls her. She walks to the kitchen counter, ignoring the pain in her left knee, and grabs the bottle of Chablis by the neck. Sal is squeezing a fat clove of garlic through the press, but he leans in and kisses her cheek. She doesn’t mind. Gina wipes her burning cheek. The phone is about to ring. Gina knows this before it happens. “Hello?” Dead air on the other end. “Hello?” Gina hears the echo of her own shallow breath. The snow is so thick now, she hears it tap against the window.

“Was that Mia? Is she on her way?” Sal bellows across the kitchen as he buries a knife in a beefsteak tomato. Gina shrugs and puts down the phone. She cannot pry her eyes from the window, the falling snow. She shrugs, shakes her head. A strand of silver-white hair hangs perfectly out of place. Sal wants to say she is beautiful, but the tomatoes won’t slice themselves. He throws the tomatoes in a large ceramic bowl they bought from a street vendor in Catania. They are not as beautiful as the aubergine slices. Sal wipes his crooked hands across the “Kiss the Cook” apron tied around his expanding waist. A funny Father’s Day gift given to him a lifetime ago. It is one of his most treasured possessions. He is chopping red onions now. “You know, those damn prepaqs they give out at the clinic never work...”

“We should have picked her up, Sal.”

“... I mean she does her stint in rehab, they should give her a proper phone. For Christ’s sake, they should give her a chauffeur and a limo to take her home.” Sal’s face is the colour of the tomatoes in the bowl, the red onion on the chopping board.

“We should have picked her up.” Gina laces her words with ice and steel. She pulls a stool over to the kitchen counter, keeps an eye on the snow-filled window. She is sipping another glass of wine.

“She wanted to make her own way here, Gina. You know how she is.”

“That’s what worries me. The detours she could make. A city full of temptations.”

“Temptations? What’s more tempting than her old man’s aubergine parm?” As soon as he makes the joke, Sal wishes he could drag it back into his mouth and bury it deep in his gut. Gina says nothing, pours another glass. Sal hopes it won’t be another one of those nights. He shakes out his hands and resumes chopping. His eyes are full of onion sting. Sal does not feel the blade against his skin until Gina cries out. Sal holds out his finger, he does not want to ruin the apron. He feels no pain, but Gina’s reaction unnerves him. “It’s ok. Worse than it looks, Gina. It’s the warfarin, thins the damn blood. It’s like water.”

Gina grabs a towel from the counter and wraps the finger. She cannot hide her annoyance. She does not want this night to be about him. Sal turns on the kitchen tap and places his finger under the running water. Gina appears with the first aid kit from the cupboard and drenches his finger with antiseptic. She hopes he feels the burn. If he does, he doesn’t show it. He kisses her full on the lips and she cleans and dresses the wound. Sal carefully arranges the layers of sauce, aubergine, and cheese in a deep oven dish. His finger is wet under the tightly wrapped bandage. He opens the oven door and rubs his lower back when he stands upright.

Gina is sitting in the velvet chair she has dragged to the window. She pries the phone from her ear. Another recording. The doctor’s office has closed early because of the snowstorm. She drops the phone and hears the crack of the screen glass on the wooden floor. Like someone stepping on a beetle.

Sal is fussing in the kitchen. He wipes down the counter, takes out three plates and their best silverware. Sal walks over to her. His footfall is heavy, but silent. He hands her another full glass and kisses the top of her head. Her hair tickles his nose. It is a wonderful smell. He picks up the phone, holds it like a porcelain doll. He swipes the screen. It still works, plenty of battery juice. He places the phone in her lap, stands in front of the window. The fire escape is piled high with snow. Now it is his turn to press his hand against the window. Sal does not marvel at the snow like Gina. His eyes hold no child-like wonder. Gina tells him to open the window. He flips the latch and realises he is still wearing the apron. The open window fills with snow. They do not mind the cold. He leans out the window, breathes deeply. He cannot see the world beyond his frost-covered eyes, but he knows Mia is out there. Sal turns to Gina.

She is smiling. He likes to see her smile.

Sal closes the window. He peels the bandage from his finger, lets it fall on the deepening snow drifts of the fire escape. The red is beautiful against the blinding white.

Sal sleeps in the chair, throbbing finger snug in a fresh bandage. Dawn beckons through the window. It has stopped snowing, but the sky is white, impenetrable. Gina sits at the kitchen counter, nursing a cup of cold coffee instead of wine. She stares at the aubergine parmigiana in the oven dish, Sal’s empty plate smeared with sauce, shavings of cheese. Sal is right, it really is quite beautiful, Gina says to herself, dragging a fork across her own plate. It is almost too beautiful to eat. She carves out a small square and slides it onto the plate. She does not heat it in the microwave. She prefers it lukewarm, cold even. Gina takes a swig of coffee, swishes it around and swallows. She stabs a silky piece of aubergine, nearly kisses it before she chews and swallows. She washes it down with more coffee. Sal is right though. There is too much salt and not enough garlic. It doesn’t matter. She hasn’t truly tasted anything in years.

Marla's Haberdashery

Junaid Ahmed Ahangar

'Bekas used to say,
"Each joy I wear
Its sleeves are either
Too short or too long,
Too loose or too tight
On me.
And each sorrow I wear
Fits as if it were made for me
Wherever I am.'

-Clothes, Sherko Bekas

Part I: Albatross

This is the oft-touted Marla's Haberdashery in the oft-overlooked state of Wyoming situated right at the oft-forgotten final hairpin bend of the Blue Birch road. I am the neon green plaid shawl made of wool hung out to dry for lord knows how many times much to my chagrin. This could possibly be one of the last times it's happening before I get discarded and dumped as unused stock. The dismay at how no one could possibly like me enough to buy me and wear me has really accelerated my ageing and as such, the chances of me being picked up by a customer are growing slim by the day. At this rate, I would not care if they wear me or just use me to wipe their nose, as long as they notice me, as long as they pick me, as long as they buy me.

Two weeks since - A miracle has come to pass. Remember me complaining about being trashed? Well what ensued was this young girl who must be 80 yarn years (one human year equals 10 yarn years) picked me up and wore me around her neck before she even paid for it. It was with such conviction with which she adorned her neck with me that I was convinced I'm never coming off her neck. Which is not what happened obviously. Yet, she wears me often, is careful with me when she doesn't wear me, folds me up all nice and hides me inside her cupboard. The cupboard inside is quite nice and warm with fairy lights never letting it get too dark.

Her name is April and she has nice hair which drops to just below her shoulders. She goes out often wearing her blue snickers and I am given to the idea that she wears them because they hold a particular significance in her life, maybe a parting gift. She walks gingerly though, speaks very little and does not have a lot of friends except this man she met once who helped fix her bicycle and tried to console her. It was an awful day, the chain fell off and she tried her best to fix it. I remember a bunch of onlookers, young boys and girls mocking her and in her quiet desperation she used me against the slimy oil, grease and dirt on the chain to guard her hands. I turned charcoal black that day and even though she made sure she washed me thoroughly, I don't think I've ever regained the touch of neon in me again.

April has just returned from her tuitions as I speak. I remain dangling from the windowsill. She's headed straight for her desk and from what I can tell, she is writing a letter. I can see a tear in her eye but she is battling through it in order to finish the letter. I am almost dried up now after the sixth wash I've been put through since I've been here and to be honest, I am feeling more than a little drowsy, I could really just fall asleep on this windowsill with this gentle breeze grazing against my surface and texture.

I have just woken up, and find myself on her study table right next to her letter and what looks like the sketch of a man and her sitting on an all too ordinary curb. I cannot reveal the content of the letter, an indiscretion too far for even someone like me but I can tell you this. She hasn't seen her father for four long years and today is her birthday and she's going to wait for him to turn up at the door any moment now just like she has all these previous years. This time around though, I am integral to her hope because she writes how her father always loved seeing her in a plaid shawl wrapped around her neck like an albatross, but an albatross of good fortune.

Part II: Medal

I'll skip the introduction to Marla's Haberdashery which my fellow strung up oft-neglected plaid shawl already provided. I am a grey long coat, the finest quality. I've often been accused of being arrogant by my fellow garments but can you blame me? What would an elegant grey long coat of the finest quality be if not arrogant? Just like the shawl, I tend to spend a lot of time here at the haberdashery albeit for entirely different reasons. It's only the most sophisticated of men who don't lack the finer things in life, panache that buy me and such men come around rarely. Also I am not affordable either so it really can take a long while before I get shafted out of this haberdashery.

A month and a half since - I was picked up by the finest gentleman, elderly, must be in his seventies. Benjamin, goes by the name Benjamin. Isn't it a touch of destiny how often people take after their names? Elegant names for elegant people, elegant people wearing elegant coats. I was swelling with pride. It was particularly telling how he did not even attempt to bargain, he bought me with almost an air of surrender which I must admit did leave me perplexed. I was wrapped in a plastic cover, one of those very few unpleasant experiences that come along with being an elegant coat.

Benjamin placed me very carefully at the back seat of his car, a vintage convertible black Mustang. He took the long road out of the haberdashery through the plains of southern Wyoming and all I could hear on the radio was Dylan. He kept replaying two of his songs in particular, A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall and With God on Our Side.

He finally stopped at a café and ordered himself a bagel to go along with coffee. Curiously, he made me sit right beside him on an empty chair. I must admit I did feel more than a little awkward initially, tending to even think that he was trying to tame my hubris. But it was revealed during the course of a tepid little conversation he had with another man who joined us, safe to assume a close confidant, that he instead held me in high regard and it was out of reverence that he sat me beside him.

I was a gift for his son, who he had last seen four years ago. It was a period of great upheaval and turmoil, and all the youth were signing up for a war brewing down south. He recalled how he had pleaded fervently with his son to not serve, to no avail. He had received no news of his son since that fateful day. But I could sense a steely resolve rooted in his soul, convinced that he would see his son again and gift him me, as his medal. But for now I have been hung inside this significantly big and groggy wardrobe alongside four other coats and I wonder if all that'll remain of us is to be hoarded coats belonging to an old hopeful man waiting for his son. This plastic cover is thoroughly unpleasant and at times I miss the fresh air on offer at Marla's Haberdashery and my fellow garments, who unlike these other coats beside me, came in all shapes and sizes.

No, I'm not a garment speaking to you. I am a person, the person who owns this haberdashery and an indispensable part of the story. I am Marla.

Part III: Shard

It was four years ago when the worst snowstorm that we had seen in three decades hit Wyoming. The wind was whipping up a frenzy, the wood in my haberdashery creaking and the snow heavy and incessant. It was then a traveler, Jeremy, found his way here and I gave him refuge. His bike kept stalling and in such treacherous weather he asked me if he could stay here till the harsh weather subsided. How the Lord works in mysterious ways, I keep telling myself to this day.

We talked a bit, I had some soup leftover from early morning and we shared it. We talked about everything, from the most mundane to the most imminent and urgent, from music to the upheaval in the south. I tend to think I left as indelible an impression on him as he did on me. Which would have been a pleasant little anecdote in and of itself that I would carry and tell my grandchildren someday but instead it was a tiny shard of glass that turned this anecdote into a living breathing opus. The wind had forced open the door to my haberdashery and pushed the oil lamp off the table. It broke and as I swept the area clean I could see the light reflect off of the tiny fragments. It was at this moment when Jeremy kissed me. I asked him to stay for the night. He woke up the next morning and was running a high fever. He ended up staying eight days and seven nights and I nursed him well. During the course of his recovery and unlikely stay at my haberdashery we became inseparable. We made love by night and infused each other with idealistic passions by day. He wanted to go on a quest to the south, unsure of what he'd find there but ready nonetheless as a silent conscientious objector. I never thought it would come to that, I believed in the confrontation of men but less so in mutual annihilation. I believed in nursing him back, in the event of every sorrow he might carry back to me. But he hasn't returned since

and I often ask myself, was it his creed that led him to his journey south or his love of me and my ideals? And did my body, naked and bare, stripped of its clothes speak to him more pressingly than it would have if I had my clothes on? He probably would have been around still, if I had let my clothes talk.

"I suppose in the end, the whole of life becomes an act of letting go."

The Old Man's Trick

Ayesha Khan

Old men are seldom sane, they say. Insanity comes to them like grey hair; gradually. The promise of an eternal youth eventually gives itself away. The mind's grip on memory loosens, like a slow-receding hairline. Forgetfulness seeps in. The skin melts and gathers around knees and knuckles. Sight blurs, fingers tremble. Joints begin to act like wilful teenagers; legs refuse to straighten if kept bent for long. The mind, then, is quick to surrender. So in it turns, to itself, and goes round and round in a whirlpool. Thoughts circle and memories catapult. At last, madness descends.

When age betrayed Kiram Milai, each one from the village said madness had set in. It had descended upon the oldest of the old. The maddest of them all. Kiram Milai claimed he knew magic; it ran in his blood, he said. The legacy of magic to which he was the last heir. Milai's family had been famous once. There were tales that went around; rather infamous tales of a family in whose blood ran madness. Kiram Milai was the last to live of the family, the lone survivor. They had all claimed magic in their veins. They had all been called mad. It is not known whether they laid such claims because they were mad or they were mad because of such claims.

So this old, old man claimed he woke up each morning with gold coins under his pillow. But none believed. The village folk laughed. "There shall be a miracle someday, and you'll see!", Milai said. And they laughed louder.

Kiram Milai, the liar.
Kiram Milai, the boastful.
Kiram Milai, the mad old man.
Maddest of them all.

The wise young men on their ways to work, turned their eyes away when passing by the old man's hut. Their wiser wives took longer routes to the village well to fill their pitchers; all to avoid crossing paths with the mad old man. But their children, for they were not so wise, took no such pains. So, those eight and nine and ten year olds, passed by Kiram Milai's hut each morning while rushing to get to school in time. They passed hurried glances at his door, and sometimes caught the sight of the tiny old man sleeping on his cot. With eyes tight shut and mouth wide open, Milai was a sight of attraction that few could resist. Like some statue erected centuries ago and forgotten, God seemed to have forgotten Milai.

On their way back from school, the children passed the hut with steps so small and a pace so slow, it seemed they had only just learnt to walk. Their searching gaze would spot the old man, who now awake, looked even smaller. His lonely figure, stooped, almost hunchbacked, seemed harmless. On days when no elders were around to forbid them from interacting with the mad old man, they even waved at him. And sometimes, only sometimes, when memories of an ancient childhood came back to him, he waved back, and smiled, revealing the insides of his mouth with no teeth and all gums. The children giggled and with their gap-toothed smiles, their sleepy eyes brightened. It was as if the wave of a hand from the mad old man lifted the weight of long school hours off their heads. Their schoolbags suddenly felt lighter on their shoulders. Heavy bags loaded with tens of books now weighed no more than a feather. A dozen pair of young eyes widened in wonder. The mad old man wasn't mad, they knew.

Slowly, this customary exchange of hand waves and toothless smiles gave way to curiosity. And since a child's curiosity can remain unsatiated for not too long, the children decided to enter the forbidden territory of the old man's hut. Early morning as Kiram Milai slept and the village elders were caught up in their adult routines, tiny hands slipped under the old man's pillow. Shy palms and quick palms slid under the pillow and out came fists holding coins. Gold coins. So by the time the old man arose, the coins were all gone. A suspicion arose in him; self-doubt crept into his mind. His shoulders drooped lower each morning. The fear settled in. He had lost his magic, he thought. His eyelids felt heavy.

The coins remained a mystery, for the children feared the elders would thrash them for wandering into the mad old man's hut. So, the eight and nine and ten year olds said not a word about the coins to the elders at home. Kiram Milai went on believing that his magic had died. Or perhaps it had never existed. His shoulders began to droop further. His back lowered into a stoop. His eyes sunk deeper in their place. He neither ate nor drank, but lay on his cot outside his dilapidated hut and watched the village go by its routine. The children with a gold coin each, lined up outside Ikraam's confectionery. To them, they

were like any other coins, enough to buy them a day's sugary toffees and sweets. The shopkeeper, stunned to see gold coins in tiny palms, realised the truth. Kiram Milai did indeed know magic, he thought. The coins under the pillow were real, he now knew. But as it happens with wise elders, his purse kept him from telling the truth to the others. So in came the tiny palms with gold coins on his shop counter, and in went the coins, into Ikraam's purse. Their trade remained an unknown business in the village. The shopkeeper pocketed gold coins each morning in return for toffees and sweets, and other delicacies that childhood demanded and stolen coins afforded.

But childhood joys last not too long. And so came the fateful hour of the fateful day. The day had begun late. The sun had chosen to sleep till noon. The air was damp. So was the land from the previous day's rain. And just outside his hut, lay the old man on his cot. But today, he wouldn't move. Neither would his pillow. Tiny palms got stuck when they tried to reach the coins; tiny fingers slid no further under the pillow, as if it were frozen. So the children pushed their hands until they were scared. The elders poked the old man, but he wouldn't wake. His bed seemed to have hardened. His skin seemed to have aged quicker overnight. It felt so soft their fingers nearly dipped in. So the man was dead, they declared.

The old, old man,
the oldest in the village,
the maddest of them all,
of the great family of the mad ones,
was dead.

A big lump of earth was dug and scooped out in one corner of the graveyard. But by the time the village men came to take the dead man's body, it had grown too heavy. Another four men, the strongest from the village, were called. But the cot only grew heavier. It would have to be dragged, they said. But the cot wouldn't move, not an inch, not a centimetre. A crowd gathered around the cot; a canopy of puzzled human heads banging into each other. More and more heads hung in air over the dead Kiram Milai; the kids hovered around the cot till sunset. He was dead, they knew. But how this tiny man with bare human flesh could weigh so much remained a mystery none could comprehend. It was as if his cot had grown roots into the ground. And who could uproot the mightiest tree? Perhaps a miracle. Only a miracle could. So they went back to their homes and ate their usual dal and rice, and slept.

The next morning was a bright one. Everything had dried up and the air was light. The villagers were the same; their routines unchanged. They went about their lives with the same punctuality, the same banality. Only a grave remained in the graveyard. And ferns grew in it; creepers and climbers and wild flowers too. Children peeped into it like it was a village well dried of water. They shouted each other's names into it, to see if the voices echoed. The same tricks of childhood. The usual monotony of adulthood. But the dead old man still lay in his cot, unmoved. A strange scent hovered around his hut; not some stench of a corpse but a mild sweet fragrance. Each day, a villager stopped by the hut to check on the dead man. Each day, someone tried to move the cot, to drag the body. But the cot grew heavier until it seemed fixed to the ground, like some centuries-old rock in a river; one that had stood the flow of rough waters and braved the blow of time with a stoicism only nature could exhibit.

As two days passed, and then three, and four, the strange scent took over the entire village. Each night all men, all but one, slept with fear mounting in their hearts. Only Ikraam the Confectioner remained without fear, for what haunted him was no fear but guilt. Ikraam kept his shop closed for three days in a row. Each night he tossed and turned in his bed, and his heavy purse made his heart grow heavier. One morning, some six or seven days after Kiram Milai had passed away in his sleep, Ikraam the Confectioner was startled awake by a dream. He had seen himself lying in place of the old man, on his cot, and he too had grown so heavy in weight he couldn't be moved around. No villagers, not even the most muscular ones, could push him off the cot. Men and women had stood around him wondering how the confectioner had remained unchanged in shape and size but begun to weigh like a giant rock. Ikraam had stared at the perplexed faces gathered around him, but said no word. He knew the weight in his body, the one no strong men could lift, the one Ikraam himself could not carry, was that of his heart. His heart grew heavier, like a balloon inflated with water. This thing like a water balloon in his chest, began pounding louder as he noticed the children gathered around him. A tiny boy with a mischievous smile, nudged at his mother's arm. He would tell his mother about the dead old man's coins, the ones that this man with an inflated heart had kept hidden in his shop's safe. At this moment, Ikraam had woken up, terrified. He rushed to the shop and hurriedly lowered the shutter behind him. Inside the safe, tied in a handkerchief rested the coins. In the dark of the early hours of the seventh morning, Ikraam the Confectioner walked to Kiram Milai's hut and sneaked the handkerchief pouch close to the old man's pillow. Sweating, nearly shivering, but with a heart now reduced in size, the village confectioner went home that morning, and slept till late evening.

He was awakened by the voices of his wife and children, each of whom recounted to him their own versions of the miracle. The two village men who had gone to Kiram Milai's hut that morning had found a strange white pouch beside his pillow. They had untied it to find coins in it. And no ordinary coins, they said, but coins of gold. The coins were pushed under the dead man's pillow, for the pillow had grown lighter again. The cot had lightened too, the body on it softened, and the scent evaporated into the morning air. Without a delay, the grave was cleaned, the weeds uprooted, and Kiram Milai was lowered into his grave. Thus a week after his death, the mad old man, the maddest of them all, was buried in his grave. And there he rests on his cot, with secrets in his heart and magic under his pillow.

Flat-Footed Boy

Connor Harrison

Leaning over with his hands in the bathroom sink, Fred thought about how he had never fully appreciated water before, the faintly religious aspect, how it entered his body as it might rise through a tree. He held his hands under the tap until they were full and then he brought them gently to his face. He repeated this and swilled out what sick remained on his tongue. This was at least the third time today he had come staggering up the stairs to vomit (he had risked ice cream for his torn throat.) For two months, all Diane had been able to cook was potatoes or porridge with salt. The smell of anything more exciting – skinless chicken, even – sent him rushing to the toilet bowl. So yes, just like a tree: surviving on moderate sunlight and water.

Fred turned off the tap and pressed the blue hand towel to his forehead and mouth. Stranded beside the sink plughole were two thick moustache hairs. He looked in the mirror at what was left. Nobody had seen him without a moustache since the early seventies. Diane had never seen his upper lip their whole marriage. Now every day more of it was falling loose, like so many eyelashes. Like a slow emasculation. Recently his grandson, Sam, trying perhaps to help, had said he looked like Walter White, a character from TV. Sam had shown Fred a photo of a bald man wearing a thin goatee and glasses. Apparently, he cooked meth to pay for chemotherapy. Fred grew tomatoes in the back garden, his treatment was mercifully free, and he'd never been near a drug in his life that wasn't prescription. Unless you counted his brief addiction to tobacco, which he didn't.

Diane turned on the radio downstairs. He could hear dishes rattling in the sink. Left alone as she had been now for more than ten minutes, she would be weeping over the dishes. She hated being outside of his pain, would be at his side now with a towel and a bottle of Gaviscon if it was up to her. But there had been an argument – he'd asked for a little room to die in, which he'd known was a cruel thing to say. Diane had accepted it the best she could, had in fact started to leave him to throw up in privacy. A small mercy: perhaps then she might remember more of him than a hooked back and the sound of retching.

But then of course, her first memory of him was one of sickness. Fred eased down to the edge of the bathtub. His feet had become like a pair of overripe fruit.

They met at a party in a community hall. Fred was eighteen, had never spent longer than fifteen minutes talking to a girl who wasn't his sister. It was Joan who had dragged him along in his powder-blue shirt and oversized blazer, Joan who wore her hair immaculate in a beehive and flirted with the older boys. Meanwhile his own hair had turned solid with Brylcreem, and his moustache was not quite a pencil moustache however it was barely there. But Diane had seen him walk into the hall and found herself fumbling with plastic cups. She had only been there to help organise the party, to stack chairs and to hang coats. As she recalled the moment, it was as though a light bulb had switched on above her head. She needed to marry that short, flat-footed boy, and knew her being there – suffering with the anxiety of a crowd, wearing a plain dress loaned from her mother – was nothing less than fate. Divine intervention. Diane believed in these things. It was why his dying now was worse for her than for anyone else, including him. Fifty years later, she remained that same skinny asthmatic girl, watching the love of her life drink too much apple cider, and rush out the doors to puke.

By that point, as Fred recalled, it was already dark outside. Her short blonde hair was backlit by the community hall's single floodlight. She kneeled beside him and asked if he was alright. It was probably the quietest voice he had ever heard in his life. It was so quiet, he had to lean in. Six months later they were engaged.

Fred avoided the memory of Diane young, and nervous, praising God for their love. Or at least he had been trying to, since what had taken root there had grown directly into today – a brief, drunken sickness to six stone slipped loose in less weeks. To a bald head and the end to their safe but tender sex life; to Diane surviving for years in his absence. This was something he could not accept, though there was nothing he could do. He had accepted somehow that he would never stand in the same room as his sister again, frail and beyond travel as she was in California. Joan was a practical woman. She loved her brother. They had cried together on the phone in the middle of the English night, but they had accepted it.

He could almost accept that he wouldn't see his grandson reach adulthood or his daughter, his second self, reach fifty. They would go on living, moving, complete in their lives whether he was there to see it or not. They did not need Fred. But Diane did.

On the radio, Hank Williams. He couldn't hear Diane at the sink anymore, meaning she'd be out in the garden, waiting with her cup of tea. Resting on the bathtub still, he saw that the skirting board needed a fresh paint; over time the cream had curdled into stale yellow, and there were hairline cracks in the plaster wall. Fred began to form a mental list, things that he'd like to sort out so that Diane might not have to. He added to it the dodgy bulb in the spare bedroom, and the expired cans at the back of the pantry. The depression when it arrived was going to take with it all she had left. He could already see it roaming like smoke behind her blue eyes. What is the maintenance of a home in the face of that? He couldn't leave these minor effects to accumulate and degrade around her, would prepare the next 365 meals for her, if he could, so that she might continue to eat.

A few nights ago, waiting until they were safely in bed and drowsy, Fred had suggested something about love and how it might not be so singular. And even if it was, what about basic companionship? Two plates of dinner, shared beds, holidays to the Welsh coast? I wouldn't mind, he'd said. I'll be up there, busy shagging Audrey Hepburn. But Diane's laugh collapsed into a sob and then a wail, a sound she'd only made once before. He hadn't brought it up again since.

Fred took the wedding ring out from his trouser pocket. It would no longer sit on any of his fingers, so instead he slipped it over his thumb. Diane was sitting outside with her milky tea and her blue cardigan, he could see her so clearly, waiting for him to come back downstairs with a filthy joke and a moustache as thick as a brush. There would be an image of the afterlife in her head, he knew that, though he didn't know what it looked like. But he did know what his looked like. He understood now why the day was in his chest and head like white wine in a cold glass – these days were his last, and still there she was, in love with him. He was dying and her heart was following. What a life to have been given, he thought, and not once had he said thank you.

He reached up and pushed open the window. He called out her name.

Best Garage Sale

Robert Nazar Arjoyan

The sky blue paint was still dripping when Emin Loutigian drove past.

He slammed the brakes of his whispering electric Kia with such suddenness that the computer stowed in the trunk slid forward and hit the backseat with an alarming wallop. It'd be fine, the thing was boxed and padded. Emin was lucky that no car tailed him on this early Thursday morning. Even luckier that his coffee remained unspilled.

All people had weaknesses. Guilty pleasures. Did they not? Some stranger than others, a few dangerous, and a handful tabooey.

What are yours?

In the case of Emin, he indulged himself with rummages, bazaars, flea markets. A harmless habit, one which took root while he was but a boy being molded.

The power of impression buzzed in the wizened hands of his grandmother, she who took Emin to his first swap meet. Emin's mother never cottoned to it, always thought of it as buying other people's garbage, but his Nan was a curious spirit. Mystery wove around her just like the flowing clothes she wore - many of which were amassed from front yards. She beguiled him, his good witch, and he tagged along when bidden, clinging to her draping skirts of pattern and print. Mostly, the stuff was indeed junk, suburbia's detritus. But occasionally, something cool - an object of value - might be found.

His first excursion, in fact, led to the discovery of a wobbly telescope that squeaked on its axis. Emin watched his Nan dicker and haggle and he felt himself transported to a street market in some timeworn, sandstrewn place. She nabbed the implement for ten dollars - down from twenty - and made it a birthday gift for her grandson. Emin called his Nan the next morning and told her all about the UFO he spotted during the close-up night.

So how, when he saw what he saw, could Emin ignore the boastful promise?

BEST
GARAGE
SALE!

The sprinklers were spraying the sign, and had been when Emin initially rolled by. Water pearly and sparkled upon the bone-white cardboard, dribbling those letters of piercing blue down to the growing grass. Emin noted how that particular hue matched the exact shade of the sky. It duped him into believing the uncanny letters were cut out of the sign rather than painted onto it. Emin was tempted to experiment by casting out a finger and feeling only air... but he knew it would just get with goop. There was also an arrow, pointing left.

And Emin was meant to go right.

He looked at his watch - from a garage sale, natch, twenty one dollars, functional if slightly scuffed - and felt indecision tearing him. A ladybug landed on the leather of his belt, its shell-like wings tipped up to let the translucent ones tuck themselves in. Emin kept an eye on the insect and made a wish which never would come true. Sometimes they never do.

The pull of his peculiar passion was too strong, the power of the past elbowing into his present. And anyway, some of the other editors didn't arrive until ten or later. His employer was lucky to have Emin show up early, the man doesn't have to get his way every day of the year.

The ladybug flew off, taking Emin's wish with it. He decided then to accept the strange sign's suggestion: he went left, to the best garage sale ever.

The way was laid out for him with easy-to-follow signage, unlike the frustrating terrain of his twenties, which were precariously listing towards his thirties, only a string of years stretching out between now

and graduation. All he had was a film degree that cost too much, jobs that paid too little, and a gnawing knowing that everything took longer than it should or else went too quickly.

Emin followed the signs, each one employing the same hallucinogenic quality. He wasn't letting himself get too hyped, overpromised as the advertisements were. Regardless, Emin invited prudent excitement, the same feeling that gyred each time Nan scooped him up in her suntanned Saab for a day of divine scavenges. She would skim his baby fat cheeks at every parting and Emin could still recall the dry smoothness of her hands, like expertly sanded wood, and those nearly invisible hairs on her lip, like fine fleece of myths. Nine years ago, she brushed his face one last time, her hand become skeletal and his cheek become the same.

Emin had brought himself to a cul-de-sac, the final sign exhibiting just a sizable arrow pointing up, the two-dimensional definition of straight ahead. Imaginative as he imagined himself to be, Emin was imagining that he would maybe levitate up and up and up, to hover beyond life for a moment. Instead, he approached his destination and parked.

There was nobody at the best garage sale, nobody other than the purveyor, whose back was currently turned on Emin. He scanned the wares, divvying them up, sorting out the meretricious from the secretive. Treasures and dross hid together under the light of day, unassuming and coy, simply awaiting a seeker's keen discernment.

When conditions insist, be punctilious. His Nan gave him that word, punctilious, which taught and teaches still, which he took to heart and takes still. Again he looked at his thrifty watch, finding comfort in the margins he could afford. Emin would gander with ease.

As he stepped toward the items on display, the keeper of things pivoted. Her hair was a glinting silver sheet, virtually fondling the needle-thin waist, itself festooned by a sash of green. The spit which Emin was about to swallow with unconscious mechanicality stuck in his throat and caused him to cough, for the green sash mirrored the color of the grass, much like the tricky way of the signs. It hurt his eyes to bounce up and down, to only compare and not contrast.

Also, and more nonplussing, this woman who smiled with her lips and her eyes looked an awful, awful lot like Nan.

Emin didn't allow the frightful inspection to linger, instead compelling his gaze to the articles present. He took note of a furnace, studying the old thing with obdurate attention, willing his sight to clock each ding and every scrape. Doing so, his Nan had imparted, would spook the seller, prime them for bargaining and for losing. Perhaps more critically, staring at the furnace prevented Emin from staring at its owner. He wished he'd settled on something else, for the sweat of the acutely foolish began to bead his brow. But on he stared, and soon, the warm dampness slicking his skin turned sickly cold, paling him with another unwanted understanding: wasn't this furnace the very one he'd-

"Punctilious, I see."

Emin practically pissed himself.

"I'd better watch out for the likes of you, eh? A haggler, you are."

Without looking up, he replied. "Sorry?"

"You send forth the air of experience, young man."

Emin didn't know what to say and he still couldn't move his head.

"Oh, you're an old hand. Well, I'll leave you be. Didn't mean to discompose."

He wanted to turn and ask her to stay, to tell her how badly he missed her, to get a good look at her befogged face.

But that would've been stupid.

"If y'need me, my name's Norma Lee Rare. Um, yes."

Norma Lee Rare stepped away to tend the trinkets and order the oddments.

There wasn't a price on the furnace, Emin realized. No prices on anything within his lines of sight. He wrenched his gaze from the blasted furnace and thumbed the scar under his chin, a shaving of a moon and just as blanched.

"You gave me this, didn't you?" Emin muttered, still fingering the shallow crater and flashing back to his Nan's basement where he often played and tripped and sprawled. It's not impossible for this apparatus to have somehow trundled its way across time and space to coincidentally meet its accidental victim.

But it should be pretty fucking unlikely.

As was her lasting wont and her last wish, the bereft family hosted a garage sale in Nan's honor, letting fly the mephitic must of accumulation to high heaven. She had accrued plenty over the span of her long but brief existence, yet never once did she throw a garage sale of her own.

Anthea too loved the things she unearthed.

Since Emin had been his Nan's first mate in all things secondhand, he was tasked in charge of the affair.

The injurious furnace had been on the lawn that day, as were a great score of her picayune and precious belongings. He'd been given explicit instruction to price nothing, to allow all comers to stop, view, and broker, like they must have done in the oldest days.

Nothing here was tagged, Emin had already detected.

They'd hauled out her airy clothes, a full-length mirror bordered by a frame of fine filigree, the many pairs of footwear. Emin himself unmade the bed his Nan had shared with her husband - his scruffy Pappy - for the entirety of their marriage. It was one of the few things in her house which had been unused upon acquisition, a wedding gift from Pappy's own Pappy, a hard-drinking farrier from Armenia. The couple slept warmly together forty-six years, growing old on one pillow. Someone bought it for fifty bucks.

But there it was. Now. Before Emin's unbelieving eyes.

"You know," said Norma Lee Rare, materializing beside Emin and giving him a scare free of charge, "my late husband's great-uncle made of this bed a nuptial present. He was the only one at the ceremony who didn't drink, not even so much as a sip of wine or anise. Clean as a whistle, he was. Oh, but he danced like the devil."

Emin no longer heard Norma Lee Rare speaking of apocryphal uncles jiggling demon-like, though his body continued to quake in the wake of adrenaline's wave. The entirety of the young man was captured by another artifact, his vision occluded by the shade of black nights and brightened by the light of old stars.

His telescope leaned against a very healthy ZZ plant.

As good as a decade ago, on the day which appeared to be echoing presently, Emin had set it out with hope that some young one would take it home and always, forever, look up.

"A nice piece," commented Norma Lee Rare.

Emin grunted a form of assent. It was indeed nice. He knew.

"Belonged to my grandson, sweet thing. He was just a little boy when he found it, magic in his eyes. Believe I won it for thirteen dollars."

"Ten," Emin corrected with a mumble.

"Hmm?"

"Ten dollars... should've been ten dollars."

“Perhaps it was. He called me that night, my grandson. Emory is his name. He called and said he’d spotted an unidentified flying object!”

“Morning. I called in the morning. Mom was making sweet potato waffles.”

Norma Lee Rare continued, deaf to the handsome shopper. Emin took the opportunity to scrutinize her, this person who might be his Nan or a fever dream or the final flickers of communication from a collapsing brain. Did it matter?

Uh-uh.

“Emory, he works in show business now.”

“That right?” asked Emin.

“Right it is. He took me to an award show last year.”

“How lovely.”

“It was rapturous. They even let me wear fine old jewelry. Nothing you could forage at a swap like this, but.”

“Did he win anything?”

“No, not that night.” She pointed herself at Emin and looked at him in a direct, zero bullshit manner, with a given respect that rested on your shoulders to either uphold or let slip.

Just like his Nan would have done.

“And what do you do, young man?” inquired Norma Lee Rare of Emin.

Toothless, he grinned. She had asked him the same question he asked himself almost every morning, the same thing that many of us ask ourselves.

And the worst part?

He didn’t have a straight answer, not for himself or for Norma Lee Rare.

Emin stole a glance at his watch, reminded as he was of his job, and found that not much time had passed. The day was still young.

“Maybe we ought to discuss my grandson’s telescope. It might help you crane that head of yours toward the firmament.”

In the more fathomable fashion with which events were unfolding in this elastic setting, Norma Lee Rare had retrieved the optical tool and returned it to the conversation.

“Care to test it?” she asked, holding it up to Emin.

What celestial bodies would he witness, what stellar foreigners? Plainer had become the weirdness of Emin’s morning, and while he embraced the adventitious goings on, he also feared them.

“Yeah, let’s see what we’re dealing with,” he said, the aloof interest of a veteran barterist taking its practiced grasp. Emin turned the telescope over and saw the stickers he’d mindfully adhered, his boy’s tongue out and curled all the while. They had faded and abraded, victims of a short lifetime spent immobile and immutable.

He hoisted the piece to his eye. It fit, snugger than before, but it fit. Emin raised his head high, nearly ninety degrees, and swerved and spun and swirled. The sky was the sky, not a thing eldritch or even remarkable about it. No UFOs today. Just the same, a feeling of silly joy rose up from the ground beneath his feet to the tips of his hair, resting in a heady vapor just above his cranium. It was death, Emin registered with relief. Not his, not his.

Just death.

Death beside him, death below him, and death sure to come.

“Stars always give me a kind of feeling, you know. Here we are now, you and I, standing and talking in the light of that great big one, but it’s not in time with us. Or maybe we’re not synced with it. Either way, the giant might have exploded just now, but we wouldn’t know until about five hundred seconds. Probably the light of the stars my Emory spied when he was tiny, probably they’s only just about to grace us.”

Emin brought down the telescope to look at her and felt their togetherness coming to its end.

“They patiently travel on their own, those lights above. Keep on flying and never look down,” Norma Lee Rare pondered, almost to herself, just as Nan did, all too aware of Emin’s youthful, keen, sharp ears.

“Now, to it,” she declared, her tone downshifting into serious business. “How’s about you give me that watch and I give you the farseeing eye.”

“I have cash-”

“I’d rather the watch.”

The watch? It didn’t really hold any special place for Emin. Couldn’t even recollect the provenance of the thing. In fact, now that he was forced to chew on it, the watch had only ever really weighed his wrist down. That weird ball-bone perpetually felt itchy, uncomfortable, bad. And he looked at it too damn much, invited it into too many of his considerations.

“Well?” peeped Norma Lee Rare.

Emin undid the cuff and presented it forthwith. She took the wristwatch from his grip, and for a fraction of an instant, they touched.

Evocations of expertly sanded wood.

He wished he could tell his Nan that he loved her, that he missed her, but the woman with the green sash and the silver hair was Norma Lee Rare.

So all he could say was thanks.

“You are welcome, dear. I’m glad you stopped by. First customer, first trade. Portent of a healthy day.” Emin tucked the telescope under his arm, waiting for the dream to fizzle away. But he sensed the firm conical shape against his ribs and felt secure.

“Why, look,” Norma Lee Rare said, turning the watch face toward Emin. “It’s stopped.”

“Oh, no. Um, I guess you’ll... should I give you the telescope back?”

“Back? Never! We trafficked, fair and square. Besides, you don’t want this junk,” she said, and flung the busted timepiece behind her. “No, the glass on that rubbish let you look in about, what, maybe a centimeter’s worth? To some cheaply made numbers glued on crummy backing? Pshaw. The glass in your possession is limitless and lets you look in on things no man has made. Take it now and go on.”

A lance almost pierced his breastbone and worked a path right to Emin’s speeding heart.

“Bye, then. Hope it all goes,” he said to her.

“Everything must,” replied Norma Lee Rare.

Emin walked to his car, wondering if he should look back. But he remembered Orpheus at the rim of Hades and thought better of it. He felt a kinship with the doomed Thracian, always longing to emulate

the man's impressive ability to make himself heard. But patience, Emin thought, might be more wisely suited to himself than to poor Orpheus.

He turned on the car and made the loop of the cul-de-sac.

Nan blew him a windy kiss.

Emin wound his way along the curving road, aiming himself toward his job, and the rest of the day, and the eventual end of a dawning lifetime.

So what if he was a little late?

The Last Wish of Christmas

Paul Marandina

Fate unwinds its own path. The truth is, I haven't always been a dog. Appearances can be deceptive.

The lights from the Christmas tree blink blue and yellow. At least, that's what I see. I used to watch reds suffuse with blues and greens. That was before. Canines have dichromatic vision. My owner's pacing up and down the lounge. She fades in and out with the dim, pulsing lighting as I stare at her. It's dinner time. Jade always was beautiful. She still is. Thirty-something with raven-black hair, eyes of emerald-green and a face that makes her look like a young Jayne Seymour. She turns heads wherever she goes. The tension is palpable. She is waiting for her partner to arrive. I watch as she bites her fingernails, her head full of anxiety. She sees me and smiles, remembering the time and heads for the kitchen. I follow, tail wagging.

There is always a sense of anticipation on Christmas Eve. It's a special time with most rushing around to get things done in time for the big day. Tills ring with last minute sales, out of office messages are gleefully clicked as workers head for home and bars and restaurants hum with yuletide patrons. A feeling of goodwill permeates the house; tangibly through the smell of vegetables cooking and a turkey being roasted. It pays to prepare before the day itself arrives. A bowl of Chappie will suffice for me in the meantime. I look up having licked the metal bowl clean. Jade looks good in her black dress. The doorbell rings and she glances towards the sound. We both know who it is.

I wander back into the living room. As well as the Christmas tree in the corner, there's a three-piece settee with candy-striped cushions that surrounds a glass-topped coffee table sitting on top of a white, fluffy rug. The floor is Norwegian-pine with a flat-screen TV perched in the corner. Seasonal decorations litter the lounge. From pictures framed in tinsel to snow globes lining the mantel-piece, the place is alive with colour. I flop down close to a chair. I hear the approach of Jade with the door being pushed open. Trooping in after her is Trevor. Tall, elegant and articulate, her partner is a well-mannered doctor working at a hospital in the centre of Gloucester. He has swapped workwear for a fleece jacket and slacks. We have met before.

Strip-lighting on a ceiling, passing rapidly overhead. Muffled sounds, faces peering down. The rumble of a stretcher as the wheels bump across the ground. People stop and stare, looking back as the entourage races on. My eyes blink. A room shifts in and out of consciousness. Saccades. A face is bearing down on me, looking closely, inches away. I can hear a voice but it's like being under water. The sound become clearer. It's a man wearing blue scrubs.

We all move into the kitchen. Jade has made dinner. The table is set for two. Placemats are flanked by cutlery. He takes a seat and she hovers at the cooker, pans on a hob with steam rising from them. I can smell every odour. I watch as she brings the first course, food still cooking in the background. Prawn cocktail with a side-salad served in glasses. Drool seeps out of the corners of my mouth. I follow their mouths as they exchange small talk. Jade looks over at me. I have my head cocked to one side. She exclaims that she swears that I can understand what they are saying. I can. Sound is enough but I like to put a name to a voice so I watch mouths move. Jade gets up and wanders over to where I am sitting on my haunches. She ruffles the fur on my head and brushes her face against my cheeks. She says she loves my big, brown eyes. I close them and sigh. Oxytocin exchanged.

The dinner for two goes on for a while. They seem so close these days. Trevor wasn't always around. He came on the scene a few months ago. They met at a dinner party; a meeting engineered by mutual friends who thought they would make a good match. I have mixed feelings. I care for Jade more than you can know. She doesn't cry so often now. I remember drifting into her bedroom months ago. There is a framed photograph perched on a side-stand. It is of a man and a woman with their arms around each other. She is wearing a wide-brimmed, straw hat, a cream-coloured top and cropped, denim shorts with flip flops. He has on a white tee and dark-blue, knee-length shorts. They are standing on a beach, waves lapping at their feet as the tide comes in, both smiling at the camera. In love. We were married once.

I have been outside of her bedroom so many times listening to her sobbing with the door shut. In the dark shadows of late evening, I have lain at her feet as she cupped a tumbler of scotch trying not to remember. In the early hours she has curled up beside me in the lounge, unable to sleep in her bed. She loves me as I am. It seemed that future was fated for us to savour the years. Time has a way of

intervening when you least expect. Destiny has found a way to keep us together. I'm not sure if I want that disrupted by another. Emotions run deep.

I am floating on the ceiling looking down at a woman. The room is stark with light-blue, painted walls, wooden chairs and a coffee table with old magazines spread out across it. She looks apprehensive. A man walks in. They exchange a silent look and then he speaks. I can hear the low tone; almost whispering. The woman looks around the room, her eyes seeking solace. Then she bursts into tears. He hesitates wondering whether a hug is appropriate. And then he does. She folds into his arms.

I got bored with watching them eat a while ago. So back in the lounge it is and lying with my face resting on my paws in front of the fire. I can detect the faint sound of padding. One eye opens and I spot Petra the Siamese cat creeping past. I leap up and chase her into the kitchen. There's a commotion as Jade and Trevor hear the sound of a cat yowling. It's only a bit of fun. I smile inside. We share a love-hate relationship, me and the oriental moggie. She likes to lie in wait for me, crouched on a chair under the table. When I forget she's there, she swipes her paws at me as I pass by, hisses and runs off.

Things calm down and the diners slide the glass, patio door open and step into the garden. A light comes on sensing motion. They stand on the lawn with partly-drunk, glasses of wine in their hands. On both sides are panelled, wooden fences lined by rose bushes. A stone sun-dial stands in the middle of the garden. At the bottom is a row of bushes. On the other side is common land that forms a hill. Sheep use it during the day. In the evening, the sun sets on the brow.

They stand and talk. Jade recounts her day at the village shop in Brierley, serving old people and peddling local gossip. Trevor expounds his life and death tales as a surgeon. He tries to save every one. Some die on him. He's still so sorry. If he could turn the clock back. They didn't know each other then. Just ships passing in a dying man's night. They don't talk about that anymore. It's a wound that's closing slowly. Time heals. In the end, there's just a scar. It's always there, though.

I am drifting away. Where there was a friends and family room, now there is darkness followed by blinding light. I can feel my head being licked. My eyes being licked. Everything feels different. Strange. I have no thoughts other than "being". It's like being reset. I have been.

I can vaguely remember my other mum. The last time I saw her she was surrounded by puppies. A woman had called looking to adopt one. I had been singled out and presented to her. She had held me up to her face, my legs dangling in the air. For a moment, there was the most curious feeling of déjà vu. She had smiled and said that she had fallen in love. And so Jade took me home and we were united once more. Not that she knew who I had been once. I guess that bond remained. We had been married for a couple of years until the heart attack came long. Life can be a game of chance. It was Trevor that had tried to save me.

Out here in the country, light pollution is not as bad as in towns and cities. The night sky is a sheet of ebony punctured by a myriad of stars. We are all looking up at the Heavens, our breath visible in the air as it's so cold. A blanket of snow has fallen. The ground shows a trail of footprints tracking our route from the house. A shooting star blazes across the horizon. Trevor looks at Jade and suggests she makes a wish. She closes her eyes for a moment. When she opens them again she looks sad. There's a tear in her eye. He looks concerned. She puts her head on his shoulder. I think I know what she's wished for. Christmas is a time for miracles. Maybe I will awake a man again in the morning. I make my own wish.

There's nothing quite like Christmas Day morning. Jade is in the kitchen wearing a grey, dressing gown and slippers. She's fixing breakfast. Eggs, bacon, sausage and tomato. Trevor is sitting at the table sipping orange juice from a glass. There are wrapped presents under the Christmas tree. They eat and meander into the lounge afterwards. She is leaning across from a chair to hold his hands in hers. He is seated on the sofa looking at her with a quizzical expression. She looks solemn. She tells him she has some news. We all hold our breath. He is going to be a father. Seconds pass so slowly. It seems my wish came true, after all. I want Jade to be happy like we were once. If that means being with another then so be it. I can deal with it after all.

The patio door is slightly ajar from an earlier sojourn of Jade's. Wedging myself in the gap, I wriggle until it opens enough to let me through. Nobody sees me. They are still embracing and talking excitedly about the future. I slope into the garden. There's a gap in the bushes at the bottom that I have escaped

through many times. As selfless as I feel, I have no desire to see any more. It's time to make my way out into the world. Unfettered.

I can hear robins singing as I approach the end of the garden. There is still snow on the ground. Animal tracks on the hills beyond give away the presence of various inhabitants, among them foxes. I can see the gap I normally squeeze through. I know Jade will be upset by my leaving but it's for the best. She will get over it. She has Trevor and happier times to look forward to. I duck my head, ready to manoeuvre my way through the tangle of brush. As I do so, a grey shape blocks my path. Surprised, I look up. It's my nemesis – Petra. The Siamese is arching her back, making herself look as big as possible, fur standing on end like she's had an electric shock. Yellow eyes with dark pupils glare at me. I stare back and hear a voice calling me. I turn around to see Jade arm in arm with Trevor standing outside on cold flagstones covered in slush. They are both smiling and looking right at me. Jade is calling my name. It seems fate has decreed that it's not time for me to leave after all. An extended family awaits. I sidle back towards the house thinking of ways to get Petra back. I'm sure I can hear her muttering "Merry Christmas" under her feline breath. I could be imagining it.

Unweathered

Mona Mehas

Ivy walked through the chambers of the dark ship, checking on the others. Their branches swished along the floor, creating echoes in the hallway. As the one with the most training, they'd taken on that responsibility, including waking first. Their training had been rigorous but necessary. They didn't know how long they had been awake; time stood still in the round ship. It didn't matter, anyway. They would have all the time in the world later.

Olive moved in her tube, her eyes opening when Ivy stopped. Ivy touched the control on the screen. The transparent cover slid to the side, allowing Olive to climb out.

"How long?" Olive stretched, her long arms curling.

"I don't know."

Together they stared out the curved windows of the round ship at the dark planet below. A rush of hope arose in Ivy, tempered with the harsh reality of their situation. Their job, creating new life on a dead planet, was formidable, but Ivy had faith in everyone aboard. After a few minutes of staring, Olive and Ivy headed in different directions. There were many other tubes to monitor.

"Why is it so cold in here?" Forest climbed from his tube as Ivy greeted him.

"We must prepare ourselves," Ivy said. "It's much colder on the planet's surface. Remember your training." Forest was huge, his heaviness casting shadows. Ivy found it strange he'd be so confused.

Forest looked at them through dark eyes. "Yes, I remember."

He stared out the curved window, then headed off through the chambers as Olive had done. Ivy watched as he left, hoping the others would wake soon. They never questioned their decision to be the first to awaken and help others. Even after all their training, fear crept into Ivy's heart like a snake in their branches. They shook their limbs, clearing their mind. Soon it would be time to disperse.

Olive approached with Jade and Kale.

"Is everyone awake?" Jade asked.

"I'm not sure yet," Ivy answered. "Forest is walking the ship, as well."

"Why don't you rest." Kale put his hand on Ivy's shoulder. "You must be tired."

Ivy was exhausted. They slumped into a wall; there were no corners. Their eyes were heavy as the others walked away. Ivy dreamed of climbing, wind whistling through their leaves.

A while later, Ivy's eyes opened, more refreshed. They heard voices, which meant more had come out of their tubes. They stood, stretched their arms, and stared out the window.

"Look!" Pear said. "Ivy's awake!" She and the others came to stand beside Ivy.

"Who are we missing?" Ivy looked at all the living beings gathered around them.

"Reseda and Cyan are not awake yet," said Persia, their voice booming, loud as a country.

Ivy shivered. "You know the rules. Someone should sit with them. There might be a problem."

"I'll go," Spring bubbled.

"As will I," said Sage.

The two scampered off while the rest looked at Ivy with anticipation.

“We must wait,” Ivy told them. “For now, look out the curved windows. Contemplate our new home below.”

Ivy sat back down, joined by Olive and Forest, leaning on Ivy as they rested. The chatter of the others comforted Ivy as Olive slept peacefully, but Forest never closed his eyes.

Soon, Ivy looked up. Sea was standing in front of them. “They’re coming.”

Ivy nudged Olive awake, and the three of them stood.

“So good to see everyone,” Cyan said, yawning.

Spring was helping Reseda, a little unsteady on his feet.

The greens looked from one to the other, shivering and nodding.

“Aren’t you cold?” Malachite asked Pine and Mint.

“I have a built-in heating system,” Mint explained.

Pine shook his branches. “I’m used to the cold.”

Ivy walked to the center of the round ship and sat down. The others gathered around them in a semi-circle to listen. Time seemed to stand still while they waited for everyone to settle in comfortably. When all the talking had stopped and all eyes were on Ivy, they folded their hands and lifted their head.

“You all know why we are here,” Ivy began. The others nodded silently. “I volunteered to wake first and give last-minute instructions.” Ivy lowered their eyes before raising them again. “The planet below us has been dead for centuries. The sun died, the air quit moving, and the temperatures plunged. Without the sun, there is no weather. No water vapor is pulled up into the sky to fall as precipitation. The planet no longer rotates but sits there in space, as we do, on this ship.”

Ivy looked at the thirty-two greens in front of them before continuing. “A few of you will provide shelter because you will grow larger and stronger. Forest, Meadow, Hunter, Persia, and Sea will become the protectors of the smaller ones.”

Forest puffed out his chest while Sea gurgled. Meadow and Hunter stood, extending their arms over the rest.

“We are happy to provide shelter,” Meadow whispered.

“And safety for those who need it,” Hunter bellowed.

“Like me,” said Moss.”

“Yes,” Ivy continued. “Most of us are tiny.”

“How long do we have?” asked Juniper, quivering in the back row.

Ivy inhaled deeply. “It won’t be long now. On this ship, we breathe pure carbon dioxide. We collect the oxygen of our exhalation in the packs we will take to the planet’s surface. There is still a slight heat left in the planet’s core. The gamble is that our larger green family members will absorb that heat and begin photosynthesis. Once that process is underway, we will all be safer.”

Teal had been sitting near the front, listening quietly. “We were told there might be a new sun.”

“Yes!” Myrtle exclaimed. “There are two stars nearby, if I recall.”

Ivy rustled their leaves at Teal and Myrtle. “You are correct.” They turned to Sea and nodded. “The scientists at home believe Sea will draw the attention of a moon or two wandering in space. Moons and active photosynthesis will hasten the process of the star most likely to become a sun.”

“We are ready.” Sea was at the exit hatch. “We know all life begins in the sea.” Ivy wished Sea safety, opened the hatch, and Sea was ejected, along with their oxygen pack. The fiberglass cylinder carried them to the planet’s surface and returned for the next passenger. Forest, Meadow, and Hunter followed close behind.

Persia was next. “Ready!” they roared. Ivy wished them safety, like the others, and watched as they went through the hatch to the cylinder.

“There is no particular order for the rest of us,” Ivy said, “Except I must be last.”

“Will this work?” asked Emerald.

“What if it doesn’t?” Fern began to quake.

“Will we die?” Lime asked. “I’m starting to feel sour.”

Ivy reminded them, “We volunteered.”

“I am honored to be part of this venture,” Basil spoke up, causing heads to turn.

“We all should be,” said Willow as he moved to the front of the line. Basil fell in behind him. Tea got in line next, followed by Shamrock.

“I am proud to be with all of you.” Ivy lifted his head.

One by one, the greens lined up. Ivy ejected them with their oxygen packs to the dark planet. Only Olive stood beside them.

“It’s your turn,” Ivy said.

Olive hugged Ivy. “I know. I’ll see you down there.” She got into the hatch with her pack; Ivy watched as she slipped through the fiberglass cylinder.

Ivy took one last look at the cold, dark, round ship. After grabbing their oxygen pack, they opened the hatch and slid out to join their friends on the world below.

Two Can Play That Game

Margaret Cahill

Cathal Shanahan is good at sipping whiskey and feigning emotional vulnerability with women. It works almost every time. Molly's is one of his favourite hunting grounds. It's the sort of pub where you have to pause at the door on the way in to let your eyes atune to the murky lighting. He hasn't been here for a while. He spreads himself around, careful not to overdo any particular pub and gain a reputation that might scupper his chances.

He has positioned himself on one of the big square stools at the bar, directly beneath the TV. This means that women get the chance to check him out, while they pretend it is something on the TV that has caught their eye. The young crowd usually gravitate to the cordoned off alleyway out the back that serves as the smoking area, where you have to shout to be heard over the music. He prefers the bar, which though not as busy, affords more opportunities to get things started with a casual chat. It's quieter than he would like tonight though.

Just as that thought enters his head, a gang of women push through the door. He doesn't react but patiently waits until they move towards the bar counter, entering his peripheral vision. He spots her straight away. She's in her forties, he reckons, with flowing shoulder-length brown hair. He prefers that sort of natural cut to those severe angular styles women copy out of magazines. She throws a glance in his direction as she tries to get the barman's attention. Her make-up is light, a touch of mascara and a dark burgundy lipstick that suits her colouring. In contrast to her friends, who are squashed into short shiny dresses that are a size or two too small for them, she is wearing a classic blue shirt tucked into jeans. He might have thought her a bit too square were it not for the bright red boots that show a bit of flair and personality. She finally gets served and as she turns to follow her friends out to the smoking area she sneaks in another look at him.

He contemplates the possibilities of the night ahead. The trick in reeling in women is to give off the air of a man who is perfectly content in his own company. The choice of drink is important. A glass of whiskey paints a picture of solidness and dependability, not like the messers that roam in packs out the back. It tells them that he has the maturity to savour his drink rather than to get so shit-faced that he'd be no good to them later, when the time comes. He is past the age of nightclubs, the successful haunts of his younger days. Now, touching fifty, his waistline and hairline not what they used to be, a subtler approach is called for.

They make it all the easier for him because they come to him now. He lets them think that they instigated contact. Women like to think they're the ones in charge. There are always a few that secretly crave the tables to be turned and for him to grab them by the hair when he enters them from behind and tie them up like he owns them. It's usually the most tightly wound ones who get off on that sort of thing, often to their own surprise. Women never realise how easily they can be read.

Once a woman engages, step one is to show an interest in her by asking what she works at, what she like to do in her free time, about her family, that sort of thing. Step two is to reveal a chink in his armour, to reluctantly expose a traumatic life event that allows him to show his emotional side, while being careful not to come across as weak. Women think they want a man who feels things deeply, like they do, but they don't want a blubbing emotional wreck, or at least the well-adjusted ones don't. A sick or dead dog is usually a good angle. The choice of dog is important. Fancy breeds like poodles don't elicit the same response as sheepdogs, labradors or golden retrievers. Anniversaries of the deaths of ex-girlfriends and parents work well too if you want to ramp things up. The deaths of current girlfriends, wives and children are to be avoided as that kind of crippling grief doesn't make anyone seem attractive. Once you've got their sympathy, they're usually hooked. Tonight's target has the look of a dog person, the sort who would buy a simple story.

The back door of the pub opens a couple of times: a group of lads leaving first, then another two in to buy a round. The third time, it is her, back in to order another gin and tonic. She acknowledges him with a nod and he raises his glass in her direction in answer. By the time she returns for her third drink, they exchange a few words about the golf that's on the TV and how the Irish are doing. When it comes to her fourth, they finally introduce themselves to each other and she ends up on the bar stool beside him.

He finds out that her name is Carol. She's a librarian who reads a lot and doesn't care much for TV. It's a welcome change from the usual Netflix-obsessed women he seems to meet more and more these days. He doesn't see the point in paying extra to watch TV when he has so many channels on the Sky box already and doesn't get to watch the half of them as it is. She's originally from Athenry, from a farming background, where she grew up with lots of brothers and a sheepdog on the front step and still loves the outdoors and walking. His radar is on the ball tonight. She's easy to talk to, bubbly without being silly, just the way he likes them. He tailors his story to mirror hers, tells her his name is Joe, that he grew up in the country, always had an interest in how things worked, was always building things as a child and that's why he ended up in engineering. He knows fuck all about engineering but no doubt more than a librarian, and it sounds better than the truth. Warehouse Supervisor doesn't exactly paint the picture of success he's after.

Then he goes quiet and stares into the half-inch of Jameson left in his glass, prompting her to ask if he is okay.

"Ah, I am and I'm not," he says. "I came out because I didn't want to be at home on my own. The place felt too quiet. Charlie, my golden retriever, he...died a couple of days ago."

"Oh, I'm sorry," she says, touching his arm.

"Ah, lookit, I'd had him for twelve years so I can't complain. He'd been getting stiff and slow with arthritis these last few years and when his heart started giving trouble, I knew it was time to let him go. It's just you'd be lost without him, you know, after having him to come home to every day for so long."

"Of course, I haven't had a dog since I lived at home but Jesus sure, they were part of the family."

They don't get to dwell on the absence of Charlie any longer as her friends traipse back into the bar on their way home.

"You coming, we're going to grab a taxi home?" one of them asks.

"No, you go on ahead," she says. "I'll head off myself when I've finished this drink. This is Joe, by the way."

"Hi Joe," they all obediently call out in chorus.

"Bye Joe," one cheekily adds as she waves from the door.

Last orders are called and she lets him buy her one last drink.

"Will you join me for a bag of chips?" he asks, as they drain the end of their glasses twenty minutes later. He wants to prolong the night but doesn't want to scare her off by jumping the gun.

"Aye, sure why not," she answers. "I don't know when I last had a bag of chips."

He holds up her coat for her and as her left hand grazes against his on its way into its sleeve. Her skin is warm and soft. He leads the way to the door and holds it open for her to pass through first. As they step out into the night they are met by a blast of wind coming up off the river that stops them both in their tracks. When she lets herself fall into his bulk to shield her from the biting cold, he knows he is in there. They put their heads down and plough directly into the wind. He puts his arm around her to brace them both. She tries to say something but the wind whips her voice away so they continue in silence towards Patrick Street. When they reach the corner and turn out of the direct path of the wind, they both stop to laugh at the relief of it for a moment, before continuing onwards towards the chipper.

As they join the end of the long queue she is saying something about the clothes shop across the road changing hands. Though he can hear her perfectly, he pretends he can't, and leans down so his face is closer to hers. He can't resist going in for a peck on the cheek. He is reminding himself to take things easy and not to rush it, when she takes him by surprise, turning her head so her mouth connects with his. He lets himself go and meets her with the hunger that he has been holding at bay all night. They part, slightly embarrassed, and return to talking nonsense about nothing in particular.

Five minutes later, they are only marginally closer to reaching the door of the chipper. It is thronged with young ones inside, students no doubt, making sure they've spent as much of their parents hard-earned money on their night out as they can.

"Do you know what?" she says. "The hunger is going off me with all this waiting. It'll be all hours before we get served."

"Well, I'd invite you back to mine but I know I've nothing in the house. I've to do a big shop in the morning," he admits.

"Do you've any drink though? I wouldn't mind another one."

"That," he says confidently. "I have plenty of."

"Come on, so," she says. "That'll do us."

When they reach his place, he brings out the special occasion Bushmill's sixteen-year old Single Malt and they follow it with two hours of slow, soft, satisfying sex, first on the sofa and then in his bed. Slow and easy can be just as good as going at it hell for leather, if you've the right girl.

When he wakes up in the morning, she is already gone. Though he prefers it that way, he wouldn't have minded a repeat performance of last night. He usually pretends to be still asleep when he hears them getting up. Small talk in the cold light of day just doesn't feel the same. Sometimes they ask for his number before they leave and he'll call it out to them with a digit wrong. That way he can blame them for taking it down incorrectly if he ever runs into them again. He tries not to use the same pub too often and rotates his way around five or six of his favourites. He never uses his real name.

He lingers in bed until an unreasonable hour, not wanting to break the spell of contentedness he is feeling. When he eventually gets up, he remembers there is little to eat in the house so he grabs his car keys and heads for the supermarket. He is driving along day-dreaming about Carol and the deep moans of satisfaction she made last night when a loud siren brings him back to reality.

"Fuck," he says out loud.

There is a Garda car behind him with its blue lights on. He pulls over onto the hard shoulder. He has no idea how long they've been behind him for or what speed he was doing. He watches in the rear-view mirror as two guards get out and walk towards his car. He doesn't realise it is her until she is standing right at the car door, looking down at him. Her hair is pulled back tightly into a bun that reminds him of Mrs. Hegarty, his sour-pussed school principal from years back. All her softness is gone, her face taut and harsh, and the square-shouldered uniform removes any hint of femininity, making her look like a man.

"I'm Sergeant Jean O'Rourke," she says with a stony face. "And this," she says, gesturing to a fresh-faced young guard beside her, "is Garda Mark Reilly. Have you any idea what speed you were doing, sir?"

So she isn't a librarian at all but a guard, and not just any old guard but a sergeant, one who'd crept out of his bed only a few hours ago. And her name isn't even Carol. He is aware that in his distraction, he is taking an unreasonable amount of time to answer the question.

"Speed?" he says, trying to steady his thoughts. "I...I'd say I was doing around sixty."

"Sir, you were travelling at ninety kilometres per hour in a sixty kilometer zone. Can we see your drivers' licence please?"

He fishes the card out of his wallet, hating that she'll know his real name now and that he'll have to sit there, captive, while she discovers that he lied to her about it. His annoyance at her grows as she enters his details in to an electronic gadget she is holding. He can't even bring himself to look at her directly as she pulls off a long strip of paper she printed out and hands it to him.

"You are hereby charged with speeding under the Road Traffic Act of 2002," she says. "I am issuing you with a fixed charge fine of €80 and three penalty points, which you will be notified of by the RSA

by post. The fine can be paid at any Post Office or by calling the Lo-Call number attached. If you do not pay this fine within 28 days, it will be increased to €120, which you must pay within 28...”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, I get the picture,” he says, interrupting her.

“If, after that period,” she continues, raising her voice. “The offence will be referred to the courts where you may be liable for up to 5 penalty points and a fine of up to €1,000.”

She draws a breath after her speech.

“I suggest paying more attention to the speed limit in the future,” she says, as she hands the device back to her apprentice to carry. “Good day, Sir.”

“Aye, good day, Garda,” he says, trying not to make it sound as sarcastic as he feels.

“Sergeant!” she corrects him.

He pulls a face at her as soon as her back is turned.

“Bitch,” he says under his breath.

He waits for them to leave before pulling off himself. He can't face the supermarket now. He's too wound up. He turns the car for home and calls into the McDonald's drive-through on the way instead. As he sits at his kitchen table eating his BigMac he stares at her name on the slip of paper, Jean O'Rourke. He can't get over the nerve of her. He's never had a guard in his bed before, not to mention a sergeant. The thought makes him uneasy. They aren't his type.

He picks up his phone and googles her name. She turns up in loads of articles in the local papers, mostly court reports. She's a real ball-buster, especially when it comes to men, never has anything good to say about them, always objecting to bail, always looking for higher sentencing, even when it's just of minor offences. He knows the sort. They think they have to act meaner and tougher than any man doing the same job to prove they are capable, but all the while they secretly think they're better than them. Sergeant Jean O'Rourke was not the woman he thought he met last night, that's for sure.

“Bitch,” he says out loud again, as he stabs a blob of ketchup with an extra long fry. “Lying fucking bitch.”

Blackout

Sarah Turner

For night after night, Leo can't sleep. Nicola wakes to find him sitting up in bed, or standing by the window, staring out as though he's been there for hours. Sometimes, seeing that he's woken her, he whispers through the darkness that it's 4 a.m.; he might as well go to work and get started, and then she finds him asleep on the bed when she gets home at seven that evening, and the whole cycle begins again.

'Can't you just get another job?' she asks, when she finds him there one Friday night.

He opens his eyes but they move from her to the ceiling straight away and she's hurt by the distance in this, the way he seems unable to look straight at her these days.

'Even if I could, it wouldn't pay as much,' he says, 'And we'd lose the apartment. There's no way they'd let us stay in their accommodation if I wasn't working there and we'd never afford another place like this.'

There's logic to that, but his defeatism annoys her, all the same, because who knows what sort of job he might find, if he would only try, and after all, surely she earns enough to pay rent on something, somewhere.

'We could move further out,' she says, 'Or get a studio.' He looks at her silently, but there's something uncomfortable in the way their eyes meet, and it's her who looks away this time. She walks to the window, looking out at a couple laughing in the diner opposite, envying the apparent effortlessness of their lives together.

'There's a job advertised in London,' he says. A waiter is laughing with some women at an outside table, and a jogger's stretching against the Village Voice box. A stream of yellow taxis glides down York Avenue.

'I'm not ready to go back,' she says.

'I really don't think that I can stay.'

They don't talk about it for a few days after that, and she tries to put it out of her mind. She's settled here, with a job she loves. She loves Manhattan. She likes the way strangers talk to them, likes seeing older people refusing to be defined by age – she's seen people in their seventies running or rollerblading in the park. Secretly, she thinks about staying, even if Leo goes, and then, one morning, she mentions to her boss that she'd like her own visa – one that isn't dependent on Leo's and wouldn't need to be renewed each year – and finds her more willing to raise it with the HR department than she'd expected.

Sometimes, walking to the subway in the mornings, she wonders whether he'd really go back if she was staying. They've been married for two years. Would he write her off that easily? Would it really be her, writing him off, instead? She tries to weigh the city and her career against him, but her mind seems to close and veer away, whenever she comes close to a decision. But there's nothing to say that he'll get the London job, even if he applies, she tells herself, no reason to think that things have to change right now.

For a while, it seems that that's right. Some friends from the city invite them to Massachusetts for the weekend and they spend a couple of days in the sunshine, steering a boat up and down the river, walking in the woods and visiting Amherst, and then suddenly, things change. She can almost pinpoint the moment when they do.

It's 2003 and for the last couple of years, there have been times when they've thought about leaving. There was that moment in the Empire State Building when the elevator jarred and shuddered to a halt and their eyes met one another's silently and a man started to pound at the buttons, panic rising in his voice – 'I work here. I come here every day. This never happens' – until the elevator shook itself, and

life began again, as quickly as it had stopped. She sees fear in people's eyes at odd, unexpected moments, barely lasting long enough for her to be sure it's there, except that sometimes she feels it too. She and Leo talk late at night about what they're doing here and whether they'd be safer in London. On the whole, they think they wouldn't be. Besides, Nicola is struck by her relationship with risk these days, interested, in a detached sort of way, in how it starts to seem normal, the longer you live with it.

Then, one day, when she's spent the afternoon on a job so tedious she'd been putting it off for weeks, her computer screen goes blank. For a second, she thinks it's only her, thinks only of the work she personally has lost, but then a collective groan goes up around the office and people start to come out from behind their screens. Lauren, who sits opposite her, goes to the window.

'It's gridlocked down there. The signal's out.' Nicola goes to see. Together, they stare down at a line of taxis jammed together, some at odd angles where they'd been poised to cut in. They hear drivers pounding at their horns, see car doors slamming and people leaning out of windows to see what's going on, but the noise and the shouting are muted here, on the eleventh floor.

Nicola's phone rings. She goes to answer it, and hears the anxiety in Leo's voice almost before she registers that it's him. 'Do you have power?' he's saying and by the time he's repeated it and she's understood, she only just has time to say, 'No,' before the line goes dead. When she tries to call him back, the phone falters and cuts itself off. She tries the landline on her desk, but that's down, too. Next to her, Lauren's trying to call her dad, but neither of them can get a line, though each of them tries again and again. They stare at each other.

'We should go home,' Nicola says.

There's a nervous huddle of people by the door, but she walks past them, barely taking in the fact that they're saying it might not be safe to leave. One of them, a man she barely knows, tries to bar her way.

'Don't go – not yet – we could be being attacked. There could be gas in the street.'

'People are down there. Planes are landing.' She walks straight past him, overcome by an urge to go and find Leo. The fear she heard in his voice is cutting at her. She needs to speak to him, see him, make sure he's OK. As she goes through the fire doors and down the stairs, she presses redial on her phone repeatedly, but doesn't get through.

Lauren catches up with her by the time she's in the foyer. 'Hey, wait for me. Are you walking uptown?'

They join the flow of pedestrians streaming up the pavements and through lines of deserted cars. People come out of doorways at almost every building they pass and there's a constant hum of speculation as strangers question each other, trying to work out what's going on. Someone says the whole country is affected; someone else that it's only the east coast; another that it's affecting Canada too. The heat presses down. The air they breathe is sticky and sour.

Outside one shop, a middle-aged man is selling water for twice the usual price; at another, the owner stands by his freezer, giving away ice-creams for free before they melt.

'It's a blackout,' he says to them kindly. 'Just a blackout,' and Nicola wants to be reassured, but isn't, can't be, not until she's seen Leo, or heard from him, at least. She and Lauren pass by and Lauren's about to turn off for her apartment when she turns and says,

'They'll close the New York office now, for sure.' They've paused on the corner. Nicola stares at her.

'Why?'

'It's expensive here, right? It's small. Now it's unpredictable, too. They've lost an afternoon's work from all of us. Think what they'd lose if something in the neighbourhood was attacked, if we couldn't use it for a week or more.' She shrugs. 'I'm going to start looking for something else.'

Lauren's gone before Nicola has time to absorb this. She's hot and thirsty, but as she gets further uptown, there are fewer people around and she walks with renewed resolve. She goes home, not knowing what else to do, and stands by the sink there, drinking water, holding her wrists under the cold tap and feeling the cool relief spread through her. She thinks of Leo and feels guilty that she's here. She

still doesn't know where he is, or even what's actually happened, but then finally, her phone buzzes with a message from Leo. He's on his way home.

They sit at the table, with the late afternoon sun stretching lazily across the wood between them. Later, they cook what they can on the gas ring, before it gets dark and then they sit and talk, with the shadows lengthening around them.

'I felt ridiculous for being here,' Leo says. 'It was such a long time, until we knew for sure that everything was OK. I kept thinking that I already knew this. I knew the risks, so why am I here?'

'I know,' she says, and she does, but the clear sense she had walking home that she should leave the city has already gone. She can still imagine herself living her whole life here, but it feels as though the possibilities are running out for her, and that only an immense effort can keep her here now. Slowly, choosing her words carefully, because she feels he should know, but even now, she doesn't want to commit herself to actually leaving, she tells him what Lauren said about the company.

She watches him in the half-darkness, but he stares back at her, hardly moving, and she isn't altogether sure that he's understood what she means.

'Do you think it's true?' he asks.

'I don't know. There was – an atmosphere of anxiety. Maybe it was only that.'

'Without what you make, we couldn't stay.'

'We could stay. I might need another job. That's all.'

'You might make less.'

'I might make more.'

While they've been sitting there, it's got darker. She can still see the outline of his body, but the details of his face are blurring.

He doesn't say again that they should go home, but she knows he's thinking it, and knowing it makes her work harder at imagining a future here with new visas, new jobs, perhaps even another place to live.

She thinks about London, too, and the depth of the loss moving back would involve pulls at her, but then, for whole minutes at a time, she can only think about Leo and how unhappy he's been, and how she felt today when she didn't know where he was. This is when they should work their future out, she thinks – tonight, in the darkness, when there's nothing to do but talk.

'Shall we go for a walk?' he says eventually, and they set out into the hot, thick air outside, past neighbours sitting on steps with candles and the low voices that come from the darkness beyond open windows. He kisses her head and they walk on, with their arms around one another and the weight of everything they still have to say silent in the darkness between them.

Should Be Seen and Not Heard

MJ Burns

The father didn't need to give the orders anymore – the curtains were to be closed at four o'clock. Even if it was sunny. The boy blinked in the chilly shadow of the lounge and watched his father sink into his chair. The father sat where he always did: the single armchair by the hearth – the deep-winged, plum one that blinkered him left and right. The boy sat opposite.

Every evening, before he lowered his tall body down, the father took stock of the living room's contents. He completed one full circle of the room, adjusted the curtains, gazed at the portrait of his late wife for four seconds – the old one of her in her red dress – glanced at the clock, glanced at his son, poked the fire, perched his reading glasses on his fine Roman nose and unfolded his newspaper.

The Hook, it said in heraldic typeface. The paper covered his whole upper body, so that the boy could only see the crown of his bald head.

The room was wintery, even with the fire lit. The boy took up a porcelain cup and filled it with tea to warm his hands. He poured one for his father too. Steam unravelled into the air above it.

Today The Hook didn't have a photograph. Yesterday, a photograph of an escaped criminal was on the cover. The boy had stared at the wanted man across the lounge all evening, having made-up conversations with him.

His father's tea went cold.

He could start a fire. That would certainly jumpstart his father. Flicking his eyes between him and the hearth, the boy sat thinking. What would he do if he reached in with the tongs, plucked out a burning coal and set the newspaper alight? He could see it now. The flame would bite into the corner, giving it black, ashy teeth that would decay away and crumble onto the father's lap. The fire would stream up the page in a lively, orange fountain. It would sting his fingers.

It was a shock that had started this daze – so maybe, like the words of a spell, the same thing had to happen again to break it. Not a fright like for the hiccups, he scolded himself. It had to be something big like when Mama died.

Still worth trying though...

The boy yanked the footstool from beneath the father's feet. His slippered heels thudded the carpet, still crossed at the ankles. The father didn't notice, or pretended not to. He readjusted his legs, taking up one ankle and resting it on his knee.

The boy sighed and knelt by the hearth. Taking up the poker, he stirred the coals. Between the cracks, the fire swelled, lava-like and bright. A small coal lump skittered onto the marble hearthstone, rolling in an aura of blue flame.

"Careful."

The boy whirled around to see his father's face. But he missed it. Maybe he imagined it. It was back behind the newspaper. He looked back at the coal. Its flame had gone out. It now only hissed white with smoke.

The next day, the curtains were whisked shut at four o'clock and the father was in the middle of his circuit around the room. He stood gazing at the painting of the boy's mother. The smile the artist gave her was nothing like hers had been – he had made her look docile. He had made her milk-pale and rounded at the edges.

"Papa?"

The father's hands tightened behind his back.

"What?"

"My tutor said I failed my maths test."

The father sat himself down. He reached over to eat a single biscuit before he picked up his paper. The boy tried to send his thoughts across the room into the father's downturned forehead. Maybe eye contact was necessary for telepathy – windows to the soul and all that. The boy stared hard at him. Even the father's animal instincts seemed impotent – he seemed to not sense he was being watched.

"Do better next time." The father said.

The boy waited to respond. He waited until his father's eyes flicked up. There was little more than a dull interest in them, but they met the boy's.

"Do you understand?"

"No."

The father went back to reading, "Good." he said.

The boy waited a few seconds. Then he snorted. He let it develop into a snicker.

"What is it?" The father said without looking up.

"Nothing."

"What's so funny?"

"You thought I said yes."

"What?"

"You thought I said yes, when I said no."

"What?" The father's jaw struggled to stay in the one place as he searched his short-term memory.

Perhaps his brain hadn't bothered to even make the memory. He looked up. The moment his eyes connected with the boy's, The boy flashed him a grin. The father looked down with a scowl. His wrinkles had definitely deepened over the year. With a rustle, the paper went up.

The boy took up the box of matches from the table below the portrait. On a Friday, the father would alter his routine by having a cigarette. The servants had learned long ago to leave the match and cigarette box exactly where they were. Beside it, a tall elegant candle flickered in its stand.

The boy glanced behind him at his father. Watch this, he mouthed. He licked his thumb and middle finger. As quick as a pouncing cat, he squeezed the wick. The flame snapped out. Smoke curled up into the air and the boy took a long sniff of it. It reminded him of birthdays long ago.

Behind him, the father didn't move. The boy plucked out a single match from the box and dashed the head of it across the board. A flame erupted with a hiss and a swell of pure yellow light. He gave it to the wick to share. It dwindled and settled onto it. He let it get bigger then snuffed it out again.

The second match, he dragged across the board a lot slower. It was a satisfying spark. It made a nice loud noise. He glanced back at the father as the match flared. Snuffing the candle out, he lit another, and again, and kept this up for a further six matches.

He held the last match in the box. With this one, he didn't light the candle, but held it steady, watching it as the flame chewed its way towards his hand. His fingers began to grow hot. He grinned.

It bit him.

"Ow!"

"What are you doing, boy?"

"Nothing."

"Put those away."

"There's none left."

"Right. That's it." The father threw the newspaper down. On the ground. In three steps, he was right in the boy's face. Nose to nose. He seized his wrist.

"Enough."

There was a sharp tang to his breath. Stale whisky. He was close enough for the boy to see the faded sunspots and freckles on his cheeks. His eyes were bright. There was an odd oily sheen to them, like the slightest thing could set them aflame – even the lightest touch of hot breath. The boy didn't breathe.

"Sorry, Papa."

"Sir."

"Yes, sir. Sorry, sir."

The father thrust the boy's arm back to him and turned away. The energy hissed out of him in a long breath as he sank back into the chair. Back in position, he disappeared behind his newspaper.

The boy pressed his wrist – the heat and pressure of his father's handprint lingering. The cold stole its warmth by the second.

As he left the room, the grin on his face was sore.

You Look Like Grace Kelly

Jeremy Dixon

Amanda is woken from a dream about Alpine slopes and shaken Martinis, by the buzzing of the phone. She groans, missing the classy ring of a rotary dial. A slender arm, serpent like, emerges from below the duvet and reaches for the receiver, resting on the bedside cabinet.

‘Hello,’ she mumbles, peering at the clock on the wall by the door. What light there is flickers through the tiny gap between the fluttering, Paisley curtains. A little after nine, she decides. Outside, is the busy rumble of traffic returning from the school run.

‘Hi, Amanda?’ A man’s voice that she can’t quite place. ‘It’s Simon . . . from the office.’

She remembers. She would prefer, Mrs Porter.

The office is that of a marketing firm in the city. Phil, her husband, started there as an accountant, and is now the financial controller with a private office on the top floor. He has a brass name plaque on the door and a window that overlooks Docklands.

‘Hello, what can I do for you?’ Amanda asks, sitting up, brushing the loose, natural curls of caramel hair from her face. They bounce off her shoulders and tumble down her back.

‘I’m ringing about Phil, is he there?’

Amanda throws the duvet to one side, suddenly feeling the need to cool herself, kicking her legs off the bed and perching on its edge. She is wearing a long, white satin nightdress with lace edging, that glints where it clings in the quivering light. ‘I don’t think so, should he be?’ she asks, frowning.

‘It’s just that . . . he hasn’t arrived yet. It’s not like him, you know how he is, always the first in and the last out.’

Amanda turns on the bedside lamp. Her eyes shine, a deep forest green in the gentle glow. ‘As far as I know,’ she says, ‘he’s - ’

‘He never mentioned being late?’ Simon cuts her off.

Amanda’s eyes narrow. Her lips purse.

‘Only, he really should have told us if he was going to be late, there’s still stuff he needs to do.’ Amanda rises and begins to pace. Her bare feet silent on the carpeted floor. ‘Well, like you said Simon.

He’s been first in and last out since before you left school, and unless I’m mistaken, until five thirty, he’s still your boss.’ She pulls the phone away from her ear, covers the microphone and hurls the word ‘prick’ towards the receiver. Just loud enough that he might hear it.

‘I didn’t mean . . .’ Simon’s voice is pitched a little higher.

Amanda smiles.

‘There’s this farewell thing booked for this afternoon, nibbles and a glass of wine. It’d be a shame if he missed it.’

‘Have you tried his mobile?’ she asks.

‘Rings out to the answer phone.’ The phone beeps. ‘Sorry, I have to go, there’s someone on the other line.’

‘Wait, Simon, please – just a moment.’ Amanda returns to the bed and sits down on its edge. Her voice is softer. ‘Have you noticed anything lately, about Phil? Has he been a little . . .’

‘What? A little what? Amanda.’

‘Oh, I don’t know. A little distant maybe, or down . . . no, not down . . . distracted.’ She’s biting the tip of her thumb and her eyes are wide. ‘Just recently - since he started going in on Saturday mornings.’ ‘Saturday mornings? . . . Nobody’s in at the weekends, the office is all locked up.’

Amanda rises and clears her throat, stealing a moment to think. Her fingers are tapping the back of the phone. ‘No, you’re mistaken,’ she says, ‘he’s been meeting with his successor, getting ready for the handover.’

‘Amanda, I am his successor. Nobody comes in at the weekends.’

She throws the phone on the bed and freezes, still, elegant, like a Renaissance statue.

Eventually, she crosses the room, lightly, on her tiptoes. The skirt of her nightdress swaying around her legs. She opens the bedroom door and calls Phil’s name – no answer. Returning to the bed, she picks up the phone, dials, and lifts the receiver to her ear. Her bottom lip is trapped gently between her teeth as the drawer in Phil’s bedside cabinet buzzes. She retrieves his mobile, opens his call history, and begins to scroll. Her eyes duller in the grey light of the screen. Her left arm lays across her chest and her hand holds her shoulder, a shiver shakes her, but she isn’t cold.

‘Who are you?’ she whispers. A local number from yesterday and three more times in the previous week. ‘Who are you?’ she asks more loudly, ‘who the hell are you? – Miss Saturday morning?’ Her teeth close painfully on her lip as she drops onto Phil’s side of the bed.

Her eyes fall on the silver framed photograph, sitting on top of his bedside cabinet. He had hair then, black like liquorice, parted at the side. He’s grinning. His nose is crinkled, and his eyes squeezed shut. Standing behind Amanda, holding her tightly, tickling her neck with his breath. She has smooth, taut, olive skin, and dark toffee hair. Behind them is a car, an old Jaguar. Phil’s fortieth birthday present to himself. He’s whispering in her ear about restoring it and touring Europe. He’s going to buy her a white headscarf and wide sunglasses, just like Grace Kelly. She’s laughing. ‘Maybe we’ll sell up,’ he’s telling her, ‘buy somewhere in the country, we’d hardly be there anyway.’ But Amanda has no intention of leaving the city and she prefers to travel by aeroplane.

The smell of his aftershave drifts from his pillow, the one she bought him last Christmas, musky, like damp tobacco. She glances around the room at her choice of prints which hang sporadically on the buttermilk walls. Modernist in style, Matisse is her favourite. She thinks about her house, overlooking the park, her bespoke, maple kitchen and the oak staircase, fitted last summer, because she’d always hated the white one.

She groans as she recalls the arguments about having to park the Mercedes on the road, and remembers the guilty relief, when she’d finally talked him into selling the Jaguar. Walking around the bed and staring into the full-length mirror that stands in the corner, she thinks about the office with the brass plaque on the door. Then she takes a deep breath and dials.

‘Hello, Christie’s.’

Her whole-body sags with relief. It’s a man’s voice. ‘Christie’s?’ she asks.

‘Christie’s Classic Cars. How can I help?’

‘I’m not actually sure. My name is Mrs Porter. . .’

‘Oh sorry, you just missed him.’

‘Missed who?’

‘Phil, he just left . . . that is why you’re ringing?’

Amanda turns, scowling. ‘Sorry, I don’t understand,’ she says. ‘Oh, Christie’s, of-course . . . you sold his car for him.’

‘Sold it?’

‘The Jaguar, his rotten old Jaguar.’

‘The red E-type? No sorry, you’ve got that wrong. He brought it here, about three months ago . . . but to restore, not sell. He just collected it.’

Amanda holds her breath.

‘It’s beautiful, come up a treat. Wait till you see it. The paint job is one of the best I’ve seen and the motor runs lovely.’

She’s trembling, and breathing again, in short, loud gasps. Her pale fingers are clamped around the receiver. ‘If this is some kind of stupid joke, please. . . If Phil has put you up to this . . .’ Her voice is breaking.

‘Joke? – No. . . You don’t know . . . Phil’s been coming down here, Saturday mornings, wanting to help with the car. I was a bit reluctant at first, but he’s surprisingly handy for an accountant. He told me he wanted to be a mechanic when he was a boy, accountancy was his father’s idea, well, and . . . erm . . .’

‘And mine?’ Amanda lowers herself onto the edge of the bed and leans forward. She is looking down, resting her forehead in the palm of her hand. Her hair falls around her face. ‘He had this old moped,’ she says, ‘that he used to take to bits at the weekends. I told him he’d have to do better if he . . . oh.’ She lifts her head and flicks her hair away. ‘I’m sorry, I didn’t mean. . .’

‘It’s alright – we don’t take mopeds to bits.’

‘No, of-course you don’t.’ She smiles, faintly. ‘Did he say where he was going?’

‘Not exactly.’

‘Not exactly? What does that mean?’ Amanda’s voice is raised. ‘Mr Christie – what does that mean?’

She’s staring at the limed oak wardrobes that line the far wall of the bedroom.

‘He . . . he mentioned . . . having a ferry to catch.’

The words hit Amanda like a punch, winding her. She drops the phone. Shaking, dizzy and nauseous, she creeps across the room and eases open the door to Phil’s wardrobe. She screams quietly and gasps loudly, stumbling back. Reality engulfs her and she collapses to the floor, like a rag doll, dropped in a heap.

Amanda doesn’t notice the thunderous engine in the street outside, reverberating off the buildings and rattling the Georgian sash in its frame. She doesn’t hear the engine stop or the car door slam. But when the front door bangs, she rises to her feet, breathing hard, staring at the bedroom door. Footsteps, thudding on the stairs. A voice, shouting, ‘Mandy – are you up?’

She runs to the tub chair by the dressing table, and when the bedroom door opens, she is looking in the mirror, brushing her hair, flaming with fury, revelling in relief, and wondering what the hell he thinks he is doing.

‘Did you hear it, Mandy? . . . the Jag.’ Phil rushes to the window and throws the curtains aside.

‘Dinner in Paris, how does that sound?’ he asks, staring through the open window. ‘Jesus, Mand – it’s magnificent, did you hear it? It’s like a fucking earthquake when you put your foot down.’ He turns to look at her, his sagging face, grinning like a child. She ignores his gaze and drags the brush roughly through her hair.

‘Come and look Mandy.’ He returns his attention to the exterior.

‘Simon rang, they’re expecting you at work.’ Amanda glares at the back of Phil’s head, bald now except for a light haze of silver just behind his temples. She imagines the hairbrush, flying through the air and bouncing off his skull.

‘Couldn’t face it.’ He doesn’t turn around. ‘Joe’s done such a good job; it’s like new. A bit tight at the moment, but you can feel the potential. Like a racehorse waiting to be given its head.’

‘Did you hear me? They’re expecting you at work.’ She places the brush on the table.

‘I dare say they’ll manage. You’ll have to have a go, once we’re out of the city. It’s a little awkward with that long bonnet but once we’re on the open road, you can take over.’ He turns to face her. His blue eyes, effulgent. ‘We’ll drop the roof and open her up.’

Amanda leans forward in her chair. ‘I promised him you’d ring . . . Simon.’

‘Ha, all that slimy little toad is worried about, is getting a head start on moving his stuff into my office.’

‘Simon’s vile, but nonetheless, I did promise.’

Phil is expressionless for a moment. Then with a tut and a shake of his head, he returns his attention to the street. ‘He’s altered the electrics, Joe, modernised it somehow. He explained it, but it got too technical for me, I couldn’t follow him. It should be more manageable than it was in the sixties – that’s the gist of it.’

‘Phil.’

‘It would have been nice, to have had it original . . . but I suppose it makes sense, if it’s a bit more usable.’

‘Phil, don’t you think you should . . .’

‘What Mandy?’ He spins to face her, his teeth bared. ‘What should I do?’ His shoulders heave and he lets out a laboured sigh. ‘Come and see the car, Mandy, please.’

‘They have a do organised, for this afternoon.’ She rises and heads across the room, towards the bed.

‘A bit of a farewell thing. Don’t you think it’s a bit rude? – it’s only one more day,’ she says, arranging the pillows and straightening the quilt.

‘Jesus, that’s even worse.’ He leans back against the window frame and crosses his arms. ‘I wonder if they’ve bought me a clock. . . They’ve had forty years, Mandy. Forty fucking years. If it bothers you that much, you go.’ He pauses. ‘Standing around eating fun-size pork pies from paper plates . . . drinking boxed wine from polystyrene cups. Listening to endless whimpering’s of how important I was and how I’ll be missed . . . fake gratitude and insincere goodbyes. All I am to them is another rung on the ladder to be climbed. A bigger office with a better view. A new plaque on the door.’ He growls and rubs his hands, roughly through his hair. Their eyes lock for a moment, and he adds, ‘come and see the car Mandy, please.’

‘You told me you’d sold it. The Jaguar, when you took it to Christie’s, you told me you’d sold it.’

‘I lied. I meant to, but when I got there, I just couldn’t do it. I thought this would be a surprise.’

‘It’s certainly that.’

‘A nice surprise, Mandy. I thought this would be a nice, fucking surprise.’ He crosses the room in long, meaningful strides and takes her roughly by the shoulders, glaring from beneath course, silver brows. ‘What the hell is wrong with you?’ He spits the words at her.

‘What the hell is wrong with me?’ She returns fire, pushing him away. ‘I’ll tell you what the hell is wrong with me, Phil. I thought you’d left me, that’s what’s wrong with me.’ She’s shaking and her voice is shrill.

‘What?’

‘I thought you’d had some kind of meltdown, bugged off to Europe in your new car and left me.’ She steps forward and pushes him in the chest, so that he stumbles backwards.

‘Why would you think that?’

‘Your mobile’s in the bedroom cabinet.’

‘And?’

‘All your clothes are gone.’

Phil glances towards his wardrobe. The doors are still wide open. He looks back at Amanda, scowling, then walks over to the other wardrobe which stands beside his, and opens the doors. ‘Like I said,’ he says, ‘it was meant to be a surprise. Ever the drama queen, eh Mandy?’

Amanda stares at the empty hangers, her hands clamped, in taut pale fists. She turns to him with glazing eyes. ‘You scared the life out of me, don’t you care?’

Phil heads back towards the window. ‘Always about you, isn’t it? Just for one day, can’t it be about me?’ He pauses. ‘I thought today that the world would look different somehow. I thought that finally, I’d be able to join in, to take part, instead of watching it pass by – instead of treading water . . . Mandy, come and look at the car, please.’

She crosses the room and stands beside Phil in the open window. Squinting, she lifts her face to the sun, enjoying the warmth on her skin. The smell of jasmine drifts up from the flower bed below. In the street, is parked a sparkling, poppy red convertible.

‘Well, what do you think?’ Phil asks.

‘Not very practical, is it? – not like my Mercedes.’

Phil laughs. ‘No Amanda, it’s not like your Mercedes, that’s sort of the point.’ Silence, but for the sparrows, chattering in the boundary hedge and the occasional passing car.

‘Are you coming?’ he asks, quietly.

‘Will you go if I don’t?’

‘Probably.’

‘I don’t know.’ She turns to him. ‘Did you really hate it? – the office?’ she asks.

‘Lately maybe, not always. It’s a place for diplomats now, not a straight-talking dinosaur like me. You used to be able to tell, but you can’t anymore, that’s called bullying now. You have to ask. I haven’t got the energy to ask, it’s exhausting, don’t you think?’

She turns away and walks back into the room. ‘Lots of things are exhausting, darling.’

‘Things like me? Am I exhausting, Mandy?’ He follows her.

She turns with narrowed eyes. ‘Better a drama queen than a martyr, eh Phil? Maybe you should bugger off without me. Maybe you’d be happier alone.’

‘You know what? - maybe I would.’ Phil pushes roughly past her and stamps from the room, crashing the door shut behind him. The front door clatters open and the Jaguar’s boot slams. Moments later, he’s back with her Italian, leather suitcase in his hands. He slams it onto the floor, turns and leaves.

Muttering under her breath, Amanda kneels on the floor and begins to undo the zip on her case. As she opens the lid, the front door bangs, and the whole house shudders. As she finds the carefully wrapped parcel, nestling on top of her clothes, the car door slams shut. As she unwraps the parcel and starts to examine the contents, the engine starts. She looks towards the window.

As she ties the white headscarf, the engine stops. As she places the tortoiseshell sunglasses over her ears and slides them gently up her nose, the car door bangs. As she crosses the room to study herself in the mirror, the front door clacks shut. And as she holds her breath and stares hopefully at the bedroom

door, it softly opens. She watches Phil as he silently enters the room, kneels down, and zips her suitcase closed. Then as he stands and picks up the case. They stare at each other.

‘You look like Grace Kelly,’ he says.

‘Forgotten something?’ she asks.

He walks towards her and kisses her softly on the forehead. ‘I hope so,’ he says, and takes her hand.

Piece

Probert Dean

Hello everyone, thanks for coming out. It's nice to see so many people here—I hope you're all having a good time. We're very pleased to be playing here in Liverpool, our home city, although in actual fact none of us come from here originally (I know you scousers take things like that very seriously). But we love Liverpool, it's one of the best cities in the world for music. And we're here now and there's nothing you can do about it.

We're going to play another song for you. I say 'song', I suppose it's more of a 'piece' really. This is something we've discussed at length in the practice room—the difference between songs and pieces. I think the line between the two is vanishingly thin but it definitely exists. Typically, a song is a bit simpler. A piece will usually have more things going on, or perhaps it'll be somewhat conceptual. That's not to say a song can't be clever. Look at the difference between, say, 'Imagine' and 'Revolution 9'. The latter is definitely a piece, wouldn't you agree? And both are written by the same man. His name escapes me right now.

This isn't always so clear cut. If we use the Beatles as an example again, you've got things like 'Because' or 'Happiness is a Warm Gun' or 'You Never Give me Your Money'. One could argue that these are songs. They're certainly catchy. But you could also make a case that they are pieces. They don't really stick to a verse/chorus formula. They border on being quite arty and experimental.

This next one we're going to play is definitely a piece rather than a song. However, it probably depends on how you personally define the word 'song'. Words are just things we invent after all. There is something of a consensus on what certain words mean but this is subject to change and no one will ever agree 100%.

Anyway, sorry for rambling on. I think the guitars are tuned now. Often when you hear a band rambling on like this, engaging in 'stage banter' (as we call it in the biz (and by 'biz' I mean show-business)), it's because something is being set up or changed.

In my old band, I recall that the bass guitarist would become extremely angry if I tried to tune my guitar halfway through the show. He believed that the resulting pause, the silence, would spoil the momentum. If you don't mind me saying, good people of Liverpool, my old bass player was a bit of a cunt.

Then again, I was a bit of a dick myself. I would deliberately take a very long time to tune up in order to prove some kind of point. We were young and stupid I suppose.

But it was vitally important that the guitars were properly tuned. My old band, you see, only played songs. And when you play a song you must be in tune. Sometimes with pieces this doesn't matter so much. For example, this current band has a piece in which we deliberately detune our guitars while playing them to approximate a 'Shepard tone'. That's a sort of auditory illusion for those who don't know.

In contrast, my old band was quite a standard rock combo. Nowhere near as interesting as this stupendous band that I'm playing with tonight, which is more akin to the avant-garde. I suppose in some ways we were quite conservative. I'm not one of these people who thinks rock is dead but I would hazard that very few rock bands have offered anything interesting for a good few years now. Certainly not in the charts.

Back then, however, I liked what my old band played. I liked all that old rock music. The Pixies and so on. But I grew up, eventually. Broadened my horizons.

It was a woman actually. An amazing woman I met one day who introduced me to a whole new world. Lisa, her name was.

I remember the first time I visited her flat. She was listening to so many wild and wonderful things. All of them pieces, for sure. There was Ex-Easter Island Head, who played guitars using mallets; Milton Babbitt, who made synthesiser music without the slightest bit of repetition; Aardvark, whose instruments included a washing line and a vibrating chair; and Sleepytime Gorilla Museum, who played Dadaist Metal on homemade instruments.

When she asked me to put something on I almost had a panic attack. Suddenly my record collection seemed crass and platitudinous.

‘Oh you’re in a band,’ she said. ‘What sort of music do you play?’

‘Um. We just play normal music,’ I said, turning crimson.

It’s a sad story. Where I grew up—a rough estate in the arse-end of nowhere—we sneered at art for the most part. Anything obscure or esoteric or intellectual was something to be suspicious of. Yoko Ono was public enemy number one. My friends even made fun of me for liking Radiohead. Anything that had a whiff of the middle-class was forbidden. We were raised to hate the middle-class, the intellectuals, the sophisticates, and severely discouraged anyone who tried to and rise above their station.

But now I had begun a quest to better myself, to seek out new civilisations, inundate myself in music—in real art. I stopped listening to the same old Pink Floyd CDs I’d had since I was a teenager and voyaged across the internet, which was at that time poised to take over our lives. YouTube was a godsend for music-lovers then. Autoplay used to be the best DJ around. It’s algorithm would recommend things based on your previous searches. It doesn’t do that anymore, have you noticed? It only ever recommends the same thing you’ve heard a thousand times. Or some news story about ‘the woke agenda’.

I got into classical, modern classical, minimalism, noise, harsh noise, jazz, electro-acoustic improvisation – all that stuff. I had dipped my toes into prog rock but now I was swimming in it. Zappa and Messiaen became the names I invoked. I went to see the Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra whenever I could afford it. Usually with Lisa.

What really spurred me on—made me hungry, desperate even—was that Lisa was working class too. Despite this handicap she had ascended to become part of the intelligentsia. I, meanwhile, hadn’t even known there was such a thing as an intelligentsia. She’d done it simply by her own grit, simply because she had been dissatisfied with the life granted her. What was my excuse? I’d wasted so many years.

When my band finally broke up, the bass player blamed me.

‘You’re all pretentious now aren’t you, our band isn’t good enough for you anymore.’

‘People grow,’ I said. ‘It’s normal and healthy to do so.’

‘You know what I think? I think you’re just doing all this to impress that Lisa.’

‘Fuck off,’ I said. ‘I’m going home.’

And I did.

But it was actually a very interesting question he raised there. Had I only started liking more experimental, avant-garde music to impress Lisa? It was hard for me to say. Certainly, I had started to enjoy it for myself, but maybe he was right in suggesting that I’d done it for the wrong reasons, at least to begin with. Then again, what was wrong with trying to impress others? Is that not the most basic way in which we improve ourselves?

What does it mean to like something? Is wanting to like something adjacent to it? Learning to like something? Do we ‘like’ anything naturally, or must we understand it first? A baby does not enjoy the same things as a ten-year-old, so why should someone who is 40 enjoy the same things as someone who is 30?

A few years later, as some of you might know, I broke up with Lisa. I was very depressed for a while, irrevocably lonely, especially at night. But then something unexpected happened. I started listening to all my old favourites again—the things I’d liked pre-Lisa—everything I’d dismissed as being cringey and trite. And what’s more, it lifted me out of my slump. It reminded me of happier times, times I’d forgotten about during my self-improvement, a time when I had been imperfect and naïve and completely, utterly content.

Eventually I met a new friend. Catherine. Catherine thinks 80s Genesis is better than 70s Genesis, and 80s Rush is better than 70s Rush, and 80s Yes is better than 70s Yes, and so on and so forth.

Sledgehammer, Let's Dance, Phil Collins, Tina Turner, Madonna, Kylie. Even Paul McCartney & Wings. She thinks music should be fun, and doesn't care what you think about that.

I suppose what I'm saying is this. In this life, we have to go out and meet people, and try our best to impress the ones we like. Liking people is less complicated than liking music. When you like people you simply click with them—it is rarely ambiguous. Love at first sight and all that. Listen to all music, good and bad. Try to appreciate the things you don't. I honestly think that is the best way to live, and since we are all being forced to live we might as well try to make something of it.

So anyway, all that talking I just did—that was the piece. That's it. It's just called 'Piece' and it's on our fourth album, which we have for sale over there. Thanks. Thank you. Please only clap if you enjoyed it. There's nothing worse than obligatory applause. I'd rather play to an empty room.

So hopefully that's illustrated the difference between a piece and a song. I suppose a piece can just be, well, whatever this is.

Anyway, the next one we're going to play is definitely a 'song', and it's also just called 'Song'.

On the drums we have Fab. On the bass: Dr Rob Wilkinson. On the alto sax: Gareth Wyn Jones. On lead vocals: Yash. And I'm Probert Dean, rambling on as usual.

Walking

Kehinde Mercy Adeleke

I was sitting by the long bench opposite my mother and her sister, listening carefully to their conversation but I pretended to be engrossed in the bag of beans that sat opposite me.

I had mastered how to pretend to be busy when I wanted to hear my mother's discussion with people.

Because you see, if she knew I was listening attentively, she'd send me off on an errand that would take hours before I returned. Then, they'd already stopped gossiping, or I'd be lost that I wouldn't catch up again. Children are not supposed to be involved in the affairs of an adult, my mother would say.

Today, her sister visited like she always did every year. And every year, since I started to know my right from my left, my mother's sister always came with a round tummy; at least, a six-month-old pregnancy.

Every year, she would struggle to kneel as her hand supported her back while my mother held her up to her feet.

"Deola, you are pregnant again?" My mother would ask in Yoruba.

Aunty Deola was pregnant again. This was the seventh baby in her tummy.

Last year, she had come to our house with a baby that could barely walk and a pregnancy and my mother had asked her if she and her husband were growing a football team in their backyard.

Aunty Deola had laughed at my mother's joke and she had promised that was the last time she would get pregnant. She was closing her legs, she had vowed.

But she was here, although not with a baby, but with another child about to be born. "This is the seventh baby," Aunty Deola said shamefully.

My mother looked at her sister in awe. She couldn't believe her eyes. Aunty Deola tapped her. "Aunty mi," she called her, "say something."

"Deola," my mother finally said, "what happened to the family planning clinic in your husband's town?" She continued, "You promised you would go there the last time you came here."

Aunty Deola had promised she was going to get a family plan. She was tired of taking in, she told my mother. But I didn't think she was tired.

My mother didn't think she was tired either. "I don't think you are tired," my mother went on, "why didn't you visit the family planning clinic again?" She asked her.

Aunty Deola looked down like a child that was being scolded. "My husband didn't approve of it," she murmured.

As far as I knew, her husband didn't approve of anything she did. He didn't let her go to the adult school even when Aunty Deola told him there was a kindergarten teaching job waiting for her if she finished the program. He didn't approve of her selling provision goods at the daily market near their house, he only wanted her to give birth to his children.

"What was his reason?" My mother asked.

Aunty Deola chuckled, "his doctrine disapproves of it," she said, "Jehovah wants us to keep on multiplying the earth."

My mother's mouth was wide open again, and I feared that she was going to slap her head like she always did to me.

"You told your husband you were going to the family planning clinic?" My mother asked. Aunt Deola nodded.

My mother shook her head. "Must you tell your husband everything you want to do?" My mother paused, "don't you know a woman's power is in her ability to bear children and to bear secrets?" My mother looked like she was going to slap her.

Aunt Deola said nothing and my mother went on, "If you cannot close your legs, must you close your brain?" She wasn't waiting for an answer.

My mother tied her wrapper. "Somebody save me, abi." She said, "What type of foolish love do you children practice nowadays that makes you throw your senses away?"

I didn't think Aunt Deola could keep it a secret from her husband. I didn't think she could keep a secret at all.

She always said anything that came to her mouth the way her brain brought it. She was like Kemi, my seatmate from school we all called her Basket because her mouth spoke all that came to her brain.

The year before the last, she had gone home to tell her husband what my mother had said about him. My mother called him an old maggot who preyed on Aunt Deola's innocence to impregnate her without paying her bride price. Her husband had also told her that my mother was jealous of her ability to give birth to more than one child, not all women could do that, and she had done five successfully.

Aunt Deola had told my mother her husband's words, without missing any. She was like that, a mouthed basket without a filter.

When she stood up to leave, my mother's sister squeezed a fifty naira note in my left palm, "Oyinbo, use it to buy yourself lunch in school."

I looked at the fifty naira note in my hand. She seemed to have forgotten that I was not five years old anymore. Only five years olds jumped up at the sight of fifty naira notes. Not me, I was sixteen years old. When she looked up at my fake smile, she must have noticed my full-grown breasts.

She touched them teasingly, "you are now a big girl o," she said. Now that she realized that the fifty nairas were too small for me, shame wouldn't let her change the note to a higher one.

I said thank you anyway.

Aunt Deola left our house that day in a hurry. She always left in a hurry because her husband would soon be back from his trip. He never approved of her leaving the kids with anyone also, not even their elderly neighbor.

I went back to picking the beans and fanning out the shaft. My mother must have noticed that I had not been consistent with the beans, for there was still much left to pick.

She sat across from me and dragged the bag closer to her. My mother wasn't a woman of many words, she was a woman of action. She didn't shout like the woman that lived behind our house who shouted at her kids until I was sure her saliva would dry up.

My mother's hand grabbed the beans from mine. Her hands were wider than mine and she had finished picking the beans in a few moments.

Once again, it was she and I. Looking into each other's eyes as we did our chores. Once again, there was silence, like it had always been before Aunt Deola's visit. It was only the silence of words, even though my mother's grinder made the loudest noise in the neighborhood, the silence could still be grabbed.

The next morning we were woken up by one of the neighbors that came to grind their pepper. "Iya Oyinbo," they always shouted, and my mother would roughly tie her wrapper on her waist.

My mother was overworking herself. She stood up from bed anytime customers came. In Ede, everyone cooked early in the morning. This meant that the majority in our street came to grind early in the morning and late at night.

"Only if Oyinbo was not albino, shebi she would be helping you with the grinding," most older women that came to the house complained. They had said my mother was making me soft by not letting me operate the machine. They had said my skin would only get stronger if raw pepper splashed on it frequently.

Oyinbo, white girl, that was what they called me. They called me that because I was an albino and albino's skin was similar to a white man's skin.

My skin was pale, like the sand on a shore and my hair was yellow, like the color yellow mixed with a drop of white coloring.

My mother woke up still, to attend to the customers, especially the ones that wanted to cook for their children before they went to school.

I was not going to school anymore. I was preparing for my Utme but my mother was silent about which institution I was going to. I didn't aim high like my colleagues in school. I settled for the Polytechnic in Ede town.

It was closer to home and I could always go to school from home. My mother was silent about her plans, but she had told the thrift man in the market that she wanted the last thrift. If I passed my exams, she would pay my fee with it. But if I didn't, well, I didn't.

My exam was about two months away. I was going to the registration center when I met what I thought would be fate. A man who sat next to me in the Keke Napep kept staring at me. I was used to the stares. They always stared at me and only God knew what went on in their heads.

He'd look at my face, look away, and then smile. He looked like he had seen a jackpot. I avoided his eyes, I pretended like I had not noticed his weird stare.

When I highlighted it, he did too. He looked like he was in his mid-forties, tall and black. He wore a roughly ironed white shirt that had soaked his sweats. "Oyinbo," he called me. I turned around and made sure there was at least a three feet gap between us. I was prepared to shout and run if he motioned to touch me. Kidnappers were everywhere and had I not learned in school how some retarded minds thought that the albino's skin is the easiest way to money ritual.

He smiled at me, sweating around the white shirt that stuck to his skin. "You are that girl from the polytechnic's sports day." He pointed his hands at me and smiled at his accuracy.

He continued, "The girl that was denied to run for her school," he paused to catch his breath, "you had cried that day," he tried not to laugh because he could see that I wouldn't find it funny.

He was right, before my secondary school graduation last year, I wasn't allowed to run for my school at the town's inter-school sports because they feared the sun would not be friendly with me.

I was born a sprinter, with long legs, and a firm tall body. I was taller than most girls my age and because of my lack of melanin, people couldn't guess my age.

I loved to run. But my previous school always found a way to sideline my opportunities. The sports master had his favorites and he showed them to our faces. But I had always tried harder to qualify for the inter-school competitions and the sports master had always deceived me by taking me along only to find a substitute that would run in my place. He would give excuses like, "This person is more experienced than you are."

I'd always wanted to scream at him because I knew that he only thought that I should be in one of those special albino schools, not me running and wanting to be a star athlete.

The man told me he had seen me crying at Ede Polytechnic's sports day. Yes, I had cried. I cried. After all, I felt cheated once more because I was albino.

In my primary school, I sat alone at the back of the class because parents didn't want their children to sit near an albino girl. If my skin touched their children's, they could become albinos over the night. Or I could have some contagious skin infections. So, I sat alone.

This tall man was here, telling me I could become a star. "If you can't run," he swallowed, "you can walk."

"Walk?" I asked.

He nodded excitedly, "yes, walk," he said, "you can walk down the aisle with cameras flashing over your face." He laughed again like he had seen free cash.

I knew what he was talking about, he wanted me to be one of those tall girls you see on the face of magazines, dressed in weird costumes, looking like they had just been beaten, he wanted me to be a model.

"This is the digital era," he went on, "you can become the next Agbani Darego, your skin color would make you the next big thing, the first albino model to win Miss World."

I laughed at him. He was talking like a crazy person, he was crazy. I told him I was not interested. I didn't want to be a model. Those lights he mentioned could blind my eyes and my mother would never let me.

He gave me his card anyway, his firm was near the state library in Osogbo town. There was a model audition going on there on Friday. If I ever changed my mind before then, he said, I could find him there. I took the card and watched him wander off like a madman. His name was Festus, he said. But he was not the owner of the card. The card bore a woman's name and I guessed that was whom he worked for.

It was Friday morning already and I found myself sitting in the lobby of the model auditioning.

I sat by a dark-skinned girl, she looked like she got a little overdose of melanin. She must have noticed how sweaty my hands were beginning to be. Everyone who looked at me noticed but she had asked me if I was okay.

I nodded at her, a signal that I was okay. But I wasn't okay, I was terribly nervous. The man that gave me the card had said all I needed to do was walk down the aisle. His madam would be more than glad to see me, he said.

Walking - I could walk, I told myself. I had run all my life, walking was definitely next to the easiest thing anyone could do.

I was nervous about my skin color, for another rejection. The dark girl beside me started a conversation.

"This is your first time?" Her eyes landed on my sweaty palm. We were in the lobby waiting for the audition to start. Everyone else had someone they talked to in the waiting room.

"Yes," I replied. It wasn't her first time, she told me. She had been rejected several times, the model companies indirectly pointed out that they wanted light-skinned models. But she was dark.

Chineye, that was her name. I felt a pang when I saw her. Not from jealousy, well, anyone would be jealous of her beauty. But the spang in my chest was from me feeling cheated.

I felt cheated when I saw her, I felt like the creator gave her my allocated portion of melanin. But here she was, telling me she wished she was light-skinned from birth. God! I would do anything to have that skin of hers.

Chineye was wiser than I was. She was older by two years, a university student in her second year.

"I thought Igbo girls were light-skinned," those words had escaped from my mouth before I realized how unfiltered they were. She must have seen the apology on my face. Well, the Igbo girls I knew in

school were all light-skinned and plump, but Chineye was the opposite of those girls. She was a dark tall girl with a dimple that always showed even when she wasn't smiling.

Chineye smiled at me, "Then my mother has some explanations to make." She joked.

I could feel my skin as it began to itch. I itched my skin in frustration, cursing under my breath. "You will be fine," she said, "only if you-"

I cut her, "Only if I were not an albino?" I completed what I thought was her sentence.

Chineye laughed, "No!" She said, "I didn't mean that.

I said nothing.

"Is that what people tell you?" She asked. I nodded.

"Well, Nigerians are just fucking colorists,"

Chineye told me I had a better chance of being picked even if I didn't walk well. I frowned at the statement. I had never been selected without so much effort before. Why now?

She said nothing, she said I would understand later.

When the audition ended, I found Chineye. She was right, the organizers told me to come back for the last audition. She told me she told me so.

If I made it to the final selection, I would be one of their models. A model! I thought, was the easiest job to get. Walking down aisles couldn't be as hard as running.

When the list of the selected models was out, my name was on top of the list. Chineye told me when she called my mother's phone number.

It wasn't easy telling my mother about the agency. She didn't flare up as I expected, she didn't look at me like she was going to hit me on the head. She simply said no.

I didn't fight for her validation, my mother was a woman of one word. When she said no, she meant no.

So I did what girls my age did, I snuck out of the house and simply lied whenever she asked where I had been to.

One day, she followed me as I snuck out of the house to the model firm, and our Okada stopped at the parking lot. My heart felt like it escaped my ribs. My hands froze as I reached for my pocket to pay the Keke napep man. She held my hand and tried not to hit my face.

That was how my day ended, I followed her back home, and my eyes stayed on the ground. I couldn't look at her face, I thought she had a fire that could burn me if I looked.

She told me people like that, people like Mr. Festus and his madam were users. "Your skin makes people stare," she said, "that's what they needed, someone who they would use for public acceptance."

People like me, young boys and girls with notable disabilities are put in front of the camera because people love to stare at abnormalities. I was one of them and I was whom they wanted to sell off. "They use your special ability and they make it look like they are doing you a great favor."

I disagreed. I cried, I wanted the cameras on my face. For once in my life, I was accepted for my color.

There was nothing she would say that would make me change my mind. I was on my way to being a star, to being acceptable, or so I thought.

She let me be, she let me go for the walking practices and the shoots. I should see for myself, she thought.

Then I started to leave the house without fear. I began to think I was special, they made me feel like the golden child. That must be how Joseph had felt when his father made him that colorful coat. There was the make-up they fixed on my face and the crazy styles I wore for the shoots.

I did feel good about myself until I was asked to do the impossible. "I'm still a child," I told Mr. Festus and his madam during the beauty shoot. "I can't open my body for the camera."

The madam walked up to me, she stroked my hair. "Of course, you can," she said, "no one would know you are a child if you didn't tell them." She was right, I looked older than my age, and I was tall with a firm body.

She almost convinced me but the pictures could get to my mother. It could get to my neighbors and they could take it to my mother. "No," I said. I wouldn't do it. The madam went mad. She hit my face.

She was doing me a favor, she said and I was only behaving like a local girl.

That was what girls my age did, she said. A lot of girls would do anything to be where I was but I was just an albino girl, trying to have a nonsense standard.

My knees felt weak, I held on to the wall near me to prevent myself from falling. My mother was right, she was always right. They didn't pick me because I was qualified, they did because I was different. People didn't love my difference, I realized, they were amused by it. They wanted to know what was under the skin; what a naked albino looked like and I was only a tool.

Now, I remembered Chineye's words; the company needed a different image for the internet and whether I walked well on that audition day or not, I was their best pick.

I cried out of the firm and found my way home. My mother didn't ask me why I cried, she only hugged me and let me sob on her shoulder.

Chineye called my mother's phone and she decided to visit the next day. She told me it was what big companies did, they used young minds and creative minds and they paid them little or nothing. "It was part of the process," that was the lie they told young boys and girls like me. They gave them stipends or nothing that couldn't measure their talents.

My mother told me she liked her. She was a wise young girl, my mother said. She could put me through getting admission.

"You can focus on other dreams now." Chineye said. Dreams, I don't know if I had dreams anymore. Seemed dreams were for people with some doses of melanin. But for someone like me, dreams could be far from us like melanin.

Right now, I need to focus on getting admission and maybe I could be an engineer, a pilot, or anything else I want to be.

Making Sense of Absurdity

Rehman Anwer

"You still look the same except your hair is a lot greyer."

Kainat said to Wali candidly, pretending as if nothing unusual had happened in their lives. Her composure in almost every difficult situation was one of her remarkable traits. She was always like that: very forward looking; always having an alternative plan to look up to; and a firm decision maker. They both were the exact opposite in personality; Kainat was witty and fast-paced while Wali was quiet, lost and tormented who spent most of his life alone, in his little flat in London. The loneliness had done to him what it normally does to people with fragile hearts. It was his loneliness that had first attracted Kainat to him so many years ago. They say opposites attract; they were probably the living example of that attraction.

He was not surprised at her attitude since he had known her deeply. He struggled to smile though, sitting across from her in a coffee shop in Lahore. It was the first time they were meeting after Kainat's wedding. They met each other for the first time at the same cafe almost a decade ago. Kainat had approached him after reading his blog on the state of human rights situation in Pakistan. She wanted to seek his advice on her dissertation on business and human rights. Wali was in Pakistan for a few weeks to work on a UN project. They started meeting quite frequently and soon developed a strong affection for each other. Because of his shy and reserved nature, Wali never had the courage to express his feelings to her. So, it was Kainat who had to take the initiative to start their relationship. It was also her who repeatedly reassured him that their age difference would never be an issue for their marriage. Wali was ten years older to her and the first concern he shared when she expressed her feelings to him was about their age gap. For Kainat, it was normal to have such an age difference. Her parents had the same age difference and apparently, they lived a happy life. So, it was the last thing on her mind to be bothered about. Their relationship started to develop and shortly they started being seen together everywhere in Lahore. It was a rosy beginning with the strong commitment to spend their lives together.

"So, how are you?" Wali asked her ritualistically, although he knew that nothing was right. There was nothing left to talk about: no arguments; no bitterness; no expectations; and no desire to bring back what had been lost. The real loss is perhaps when we stop pursuing happiness. When personal peace takes precedence over a struggle to protect relationships. The peace, as poetic as it sounds, makes people numb, and at times they forget the difference between being alive or dead.

Wali knew that Kainat did not go out of the way to be with him. In the beginning, he felt rejected and betrayed, but soon accepted the new situation without showing any rage or resentment. He was always like that; a silent sufferer; the storm keeper, who would never let his chaos impact others around him. Kainat, besides her expressive and bold nature, had also never learnt to stand up for herself. They were never rebellious by nature. Love, for them, came to their lives like spring, short and sweet, filling their lives with daffodils and dreams, as it normally does to ordinary people. But they never cried or protested when that dreamy season came to an end. They both accepted what life brought for them so they preferred peace instead of revolting against the realities. Peace replaced the chaos of love and hopelessly dulled their feelings. Peace was in the air; peace was everywhere, and everything had come to a standstill.

"I am okay and see I am here with you; I did not leave you as promised," Kainat responded callously again, without realising the meaning of her words.

Wali held back his words, he was good at that, and just gave a smile. A shallow, meaningless smile which meant nothing. He knew that any arguments or complaints would be futile. A lot of time had passed, and he felt he had no further capacity to be wounded anymore. He had come to terms with that new phase of his life and had no intention to win her over again.

"How's your husband? I hope you two are getting along well."

"He is as good as a good businessman should be who just happened to get married, calculated in everything. But I am happy. I guess we deserve each other," Kainat said and her big hazel eyes turned slightly moist and pink. She covered that up with a fake smile that dominated her face.

"Don't you think it's too early to judge a person or a relationship?" Wali asked reluctantly. He was not expecting her to be that unhappy.

"I don't know. I know I couldn't keep my promise to be with you and now I must live my life with that guilt. So, lovelessness is the punishment I totally deserve," she said, holding back her tears.

"You will never be loveless as long as I am alive. Although I don't really believe in such emotions anymore, but what I felt for you was real and can't be denied," Wali said in a weak voice.

"I don't deserve to be loved anymore, Wali. I simply don't." She struggled to hold back her tears and now they were flowing down her cheeks.

"Well, I am not here to reassure my love to you. It was always there and will always be there whether you deserve it or not," Wali said in his usual soft tone without having an eye contact with her."

"You still can't make eye contact with me," Kainat commented, dismissing what he managed to express somehow.

"Yes, like always, your eyes make me forget my words," he said, giving another meaningless smile.

"I don't know what you see in my eyes that my husband could never see." She shook her head in disbelief.

"But it's not important what I see in your eyes anymore," Wali said, turning his eyes away from where she sat.

"Perhaps nothing is important anymore," Kainat said, while giving him a direct gaze.

They finally had a firm eye contact after a rather meaningless conversation. They were looking at each other, trying to communicate silently.

"So, are you working somewhere?" Wali asked, breaking the awkward silence.

"No."

"But your dreams and ambitions were always so dear to you!"

"I am a big girl now, as they say. Not the one you got to know a few years back. My marriage package included that I would not pursue my professional career. So, my dreams of becoming an independent and professional woman took a backseat the day I married. No woman in my husband's family was ever worked. They are educated though, like me. But the only jobs they are expected to do are tedious domestic chores. The worst part is that they are truly contented with that, and even take pity on those women who choose to work. What is the point of getting an education when one still holds those beliefs? Those women don't even realise how deeply they are trapped in the clutches of patriarchy, enabling and prevailing a misogynistic mindset. You know I have always stood up strongly against such attitudes, but I feel I am now gradually becoming a part of it. So yeah, I decorate the house, cook food, clean the house and dishes, and learn to stop dreaming so much. Dreams and ambitions have little space in my busy schedule."

"Did you ever challenge their views?"

"I did in the beginning, but it turned out to be useless. I better protect my peace of mind instead of challenging people's views. I guess the most difficult thing in the world is to change people's views about something they truly believe in. People normally don't like change – neither in their lives nor in their thoughts."

"Maybe," Wali said, looking out of the cafe's window. Her words were important to him, but he was not particularly interested in what she was trying to say. However, he did not make her feel that he was not paying attention to what she had to say.

It was late October in Lahore. The sunlight was no longer bright and dry leaves were covering the city. "Lahore always looks poetic in autumn, poetic and nostalgic." He was looking at the fallen leaves through the window while Kainat was constantly talking about her in-laws and their misogynistic

attitudes. "How time passes so quickly, so pointlessly," he thought, looking at the pavement outside the cafe, which was covered with the orange leaves. He thought of the time when, in his college days, he used to sit in Nasir Bagh, close to his college near Anarkali bazar. For hours, he used to sit on a wooden bench, looking at the fallen leaves and thinking of his life, alone and quiet. He used to make a thousand excuses not to hang out with his friends, and sat alone there, reading a book, or doing nothing. Sometimes, a few students from nearby National College of Arts used to come there too with their canvases, who thought nature would inspire their artwork. Some young people had started a little tea place in the middle of the park. They used to make fine Lipton yellow label tea to their exclusive customers, him being one of them. As they say, the 'soul selects its own society', he loved that entire atmosphere of Nasir Bagh. However, autumnal nostalgia was inevitable.

"Are you with me, Wali?" Kainat interrupted his train of thoughts.

"Yes, where else would I be?" He replied smilingly.

"Okay, enough about my miserable life. Tell me about you."

"What do you want to know?"

"Everything."

"Nothing much has really happened here since when you were gone. Pretty much the same life, same days, and nights. I lose track of time sometimes, mix up the days sometimes. I guess it's just the terrible sameness of life causing it all. Otherwise I am fine. Days remain busy with work; nights are a bit tough – but I survive them, nonetheless. You know, I always survive. I always find a way."

"Is your work taking you around the world?"

"I prefer not to travel a lot, but sometimes do go to nearby countries, only if that's inevitable."

"Did you visit New York again?" She asked curiously.

"No. I was meant to but managed to send another colleague."

"You were meant to be attending your UN events annually. Why are you missing out on them?"

"New York haunts me. I don't think I can face that city again. I feel I found and lost everything there."

"Wali, please don't do this to yourself. Life is all about moving on. You can't just stop going to places where we had been together once."

"I know your philosophy of 'moving on' and I wish I could comprehend it fully. For me, nothing moves on. I am an inhabitant of my old castle that is full of memories. That's all I have. I simply don't have courage to live without them. You know I always had that childhood dream to go to New York City one day. I only saw that city in movies. I always imagined how it would feel to be in that city: to see the Statue of Liberty for the first time; to walk on Brooklyn bridge; to walk through the central park. In my college days in Lahore, New York from U2 was always on repeat on my playlist. I in fact memorised that song:

In New York freedom looks like
Too Many Choices
In New York I found a friend
To drown out the other voices ...

Then I finally went there. New York was there with all its glory. However, I was least interested in that city of my imagination. I had that girl on my mind, waiting for me near Times Square. That was my only excitement. I don't remember when I landed at JFK, took a cab, and went straight to Times Square. Either I was waiting for you or I was absorbed in you. I had no time for New York, the city which gave me immense happiness, and then snatched it back mercilessly. I guess New York takes you in a fairy world of fake happiness and leaves you alone when you wake up to the painful realities of life.

"We had a beautiful time there. Can't you just remember that?" Kainat said like a trained psychologist.

"Yes, the time of my life may be," Wali replied, gazing his sad eyes on her.

"Okay let's try and remember places that we visited together in NYC." She said pretending to be excited. "Do you remember our special spot in Central park?"

"No."

"And those best views of Manhattan from the Brooklyn Bridge?"

"Not really."

"Not even when we went to the top of the Empire State building?"

Wali ignored the question. He was avoiding discussing their time in NYC. He somehow associated that city with the loss of his love, his happiness and will to live.

"I can't believe you forgot all of that," she said surprisingly. "We were together when we visited all those places. Didn't we?"

"Yes, maybe that's why I don't remember anything else."

"All I remember is my fear of departing from you, standing at the Grand Central Station. I remember the pain when we left each other's hands near the ticket barrier. It was so intense that even you had tears in your eyes. Somehow, we both knew that it was the last time we were together in a way that we could feel togetherness; such a strange thing, togetherness, people fail to realise it sometimes even after spending their lives together. How painful that must be for being together and lonely. But it wasn't the same with us. When I was with you, I was there with my body and soul. I loved being with you, irrespective of all my fears of losing you." Wali was trying hard to give appropriate words to reflect his distorted thoughts.

"We were so in love," Kainat said with a sigh. "It's painful for me to see you lonely. Can you please...?"

"Do you still like Latte?" Wali interrupted her.

"Don't change the subject please," Kainat said in a requesting manner.

"I am not, but I need to place the order though," Wali replied, again with a shallow smile.

"Order whatever you are having."

"No, you can't drink that, your heart rate will increase, and I don't want that to happen."

"It's okay."

"Latte it is, I know. I know you don't like intense things, and emotions, and people."

"Stop taunting please." She protested.

"Never. Since when you left me, I found myself a bit more realistic. You know those bitter and lonely men who always speak like this. Maybe it's not their fault, their experiences are more like my espresso (a double shot), bitter and intense," he replied calmly.

"Here it is, your Latte."

"Wali, please face the facts. I understand I couldn't keep my promise to marry you, but it was never my intention to leave you like this. Please understand and move on," she said anxiously.

"We don't move on Kainat, only time does. Sometimes we are able to adapt to the changes in our lives, sometimes we can't. It's not really in our control. However, I am not blaming you for anything. Whatever state I am in today is because of my personal choices – loving you was also one of those," he replied.

"I didn't make a choice to love you. I felt a deep connection the moment I met you and kept following my heart," she said.

"Deep Connection." Wali chuckled at Kainat's unusual emotional response.

"It's good to know you felt a deep connection with me. At least all of what we had was not meaningless."

"Nothing was meaningless between us. It was just not meant to be for being together for good." Kainat argued like a clever lawyer.

"We humans are strange creatures. When we don't have the courage to accomplish what we start, we blame it on destiny. I mean why can't we accept our decisions courageously?" Asked Wali.

"It was never my decision to marry Nadeem. You know it. The decision was imposed on me," she protested again.

"Knowing you a little, I can't fully understand you being forced by your family even if I want to. As far as I know, your family could be strict, but they can't force you to spend your life with someone you don't want to. You are the only daughter of your parents. Didn't they always support you in every decision of yours? So, I struggle to comprehend how your family suddenly changed into a brutal one who forced you to marry you against your will," Wali said whilst giving her an empty look.

"What do you know about the forced decisions, Wali?" She said in a shaky voice, "What do you know how powerless we women are when it comes to challenging our parents' decisions? Forced marriages do not always happen by forcing people physically. Sometimes it's the sweetest words of your family, your fear not to break their hearts, or letting them down in front of others, or a combination of all of these that lead you to take your life decisions at the expense of your own happiness." Kainat held back her tears and sipped her coffee.

Wali was fully absorbed in her. Probably he never saw that helpless side of Kainat before. She was always full of life, an empowered and liberated girl, who hardly ever mentioned issues around gender inequality or forced marriages before. He felt a bit guilty to upset her. "How hard it is to fully get to know someone, our perceptions about people we think we know can be so skewed," he thought.

He held her pale hands for a bit and gave her a final smile before leaving. She looked at him quietly when he was leaving; they both knew that a silent goodbye was more meaningful than any shallow words.