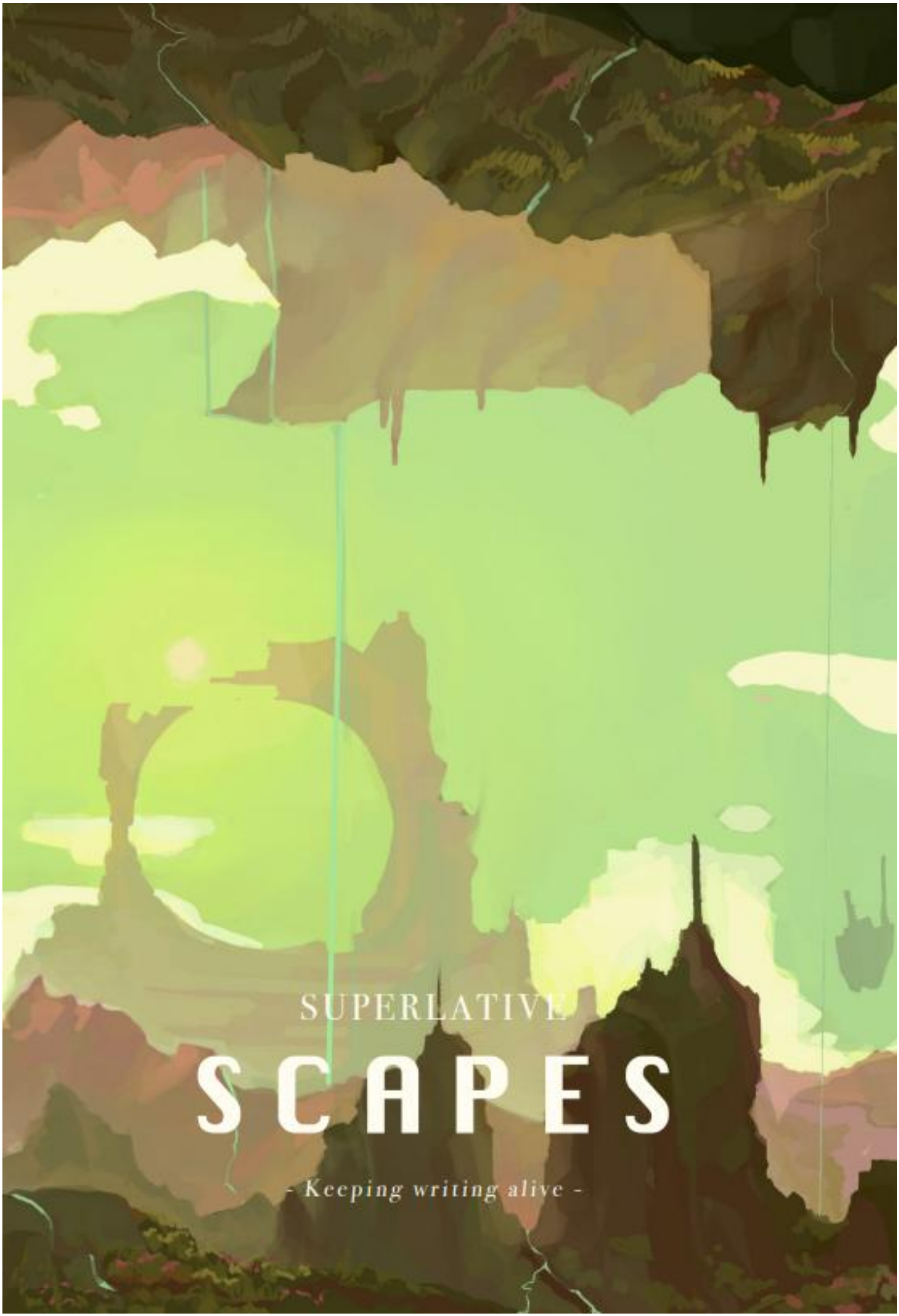
SUPERLATIVE
SCAPES
- Keeping writing alive -

Superlative – The Short Story Literary Journal
2021 – Issue 2 – Scapes

- Keeping writing alive -

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Preface

Vast expanses of rural scenery, seen from a single viewpoint, perhaps precise, perhaps romantic. A view of the sea – maybe sketched, painted, or photographed. A vision or picture of a city, but more than its mere skyline – its characteristic expression. The general appearance of the surface of the moon, or possibly – both more and less realistically – an artistic representation of it; taken one step further, a terrestrial environment that merely resembles the surface of the moon, in both barrenness and desolation, in both reality and falsity. Let us together slip away; let us fade from memory; let us successfully avoid that which pursues us – the everyday, the ordinary, the mundane; let us find a tunnel through which we may flee, and drag ourselves along it, one story at a time.

Scapes has been a very interesting and indeed broad theme, inviting all manner of interpretations from our wonderful writers – from landscapes (both physical and metaphorical) to seascapes, cityscapes, moonscapes, escapes, and many more. The theme stemmed from us thinking about *Superlative*, about how the journal might grow, about which directions we might want to take it, and how those decisions would change the journal's own landscapes: this year has seen new competitions, new illustrations, new contributors, new websites, and many new challenges to go along with them all.

As with last year's debut, the New Beginnings 2020 Issue, we have been honoured to receive submissions from all around the globe, and are extremely pleased to be able to include more contributors and pieces in the journal than last year – for some of whom this is their first creative publication; we sincerely hope to continue this trend in years to come, giving as many writers as possible the chance to take the first or next step on their writing and publishing journeys.

Of course, we were only able to select more pieces because of the multitude of high-quality submissions we received, meaning that every piece included in the Scapes 2021 Issue has more than earned its place; we are delighted to be able to gather our contributors' hard-earned stories into this journal, to convert their thoughts into paper and ink.

It would be remiss of me not to give thanks to our new sponsor, Scholary, an independent educational consultancy and publisher, who has helped make the printing of this year's journal possible. And, of course, through the wonder – and sometimes cruel master – that is technology, we are delighted to this year be holding our first official launch event via Zoom. It is our hope that an electronic launch will allow as many of our contributors, their friends and family, and other *Superlative* supporters to attend, despite geographical or other limitations.

We are already thinking ahead, with the theme for the 2022 Issue set as FUTURES, and are looking forward to publishing more writers, granting more prize money, and possibly even offering internship opportunities for aspiring editors.

We hope you enjoy this year's journal; thank you for keeping writing alive.

Ross Turner
Editor-in-chief

Feature Piece
Platinum and Salt

Circumnavigating Britain 2017

Plastic is ubiquitous. It changes shape, crunches and bends, or shatters, becomes piecemeal, amorphous, anachronistic, untied from purpose or form. Plastic does not dematerialise or decompose, but persists.

The Armada left Spain over 430 years ago, nearly half a millennium. A single bottle, we understand, will last that long in the ocean.

Sea Dragon is a 72-foot steel sailing yacht built for ocean racing, now a platform for exploration and science. We have converged at her dock in Plymouth and held a party with scientists talking numbers into microphones and art made of litter from local beaches. The websites are up, the press following, the crowdfunding done. Over the coming month, 31 of us will spend time on board, six of us going the whole way while other crew change at Lamlash and Edinburgh. We come from Wales, England, Scotland. From Canada, the States and Germany, ages ranging from 22 to 70. Do not assume all of us are white, or straight, or middle class. Some of us are golden, beloved by the camera, while others are antimony or quicksilver, platinum and salt. A mixed crew, all of us are beautiful.

Does it matter that we are all women? It helps the campaign and we feel no shame in using our leverage. It matters, too, that women's physical reactions to environmental plastic are unknown. (*We are told that what is measured is what matters*.) The UN acknowledges that the endocrine impact of pollution on

women needs more study. That's no reason to defer campaigning: we already know this is a global catastrophe.

Bottles and buckets, cups, caps, and bags (for shopping, for holding or protecting soft fruit), spades, Lego, zebras and giraffes, cars, buses, the occasional plane. Brushes (for teeth, for hair, for decks), boxes, cartons, takeaways. Masks. Straws. Lagan set adrift but never recovered. Nets and buoys, and bits of rope, syringes, pumps, the door from a fridge. Balloons. Plastic detritus, fragments, pieces, bits, scraps. Flotsam and jetsam.

We sail out of Plymouth Sound into the Channel, following the bruised and golden sky into the west. Eddystone Light blinks twice every ten seconds while Jupiter and Venus fizz overhead. At long last, we have left. Now we will keep Britain to starboard, stopping in the capitals of the still-united, benighted kingdom. Our twin missions: collect data about plastic in coastal waters and campaign ashore for better awareness and regulation.

First, we must round the pointed toe of England. After Cardiff we head across the Irish Sea to Belfast and then north to Arran. Edinburgh into the London River is the longest haul, before the dash down-Channel back to Plymouth, over 2,000 nautical miles in our wake.

We are reliant on the sea for every breath we take.

Deep in the roots of most political movements, including the ecological, is the notion that *women do the cleaning up*. Women tend and renew.

Women make way.

We weigh anchor, make way and set forth upon the face of the waters. We refuse the expectation that some man will come along to show us how it should be done. (What needs doing? Sail the boat, clean the sea, lash a line, make dinner, write an article, speak to power, take power, wield power. Have our way.)

The tangle of ropes in the midship's snake-pit resolves from mystery to use. Sheets adjust the set of a sail, while halyards pull it up and down. Here are the lines for the jib and the staysail, the spinnaker pole and the main. The pointy end is the bows, the other is the stern. Move fore and aft, above-decks or below, with care. One hand for yourself and one for the ship. Keep your fingers clear when winching. The safest boat is the one you're on and staying on board is the most important instruction.

Seaspeak, pared-thin English, is the *lingua franca* of the sea, used between the bridges of passing ships whatever languages the crew speaks. Based on British and American naval dominance, the International Maritime Organisation (which decides such things) adopted its precision in 1988. Call a vessel, or simply listen out, and you will hear the specificities of direction and speed, call-sign, and destination. Movement on the water.

Before the worldwide web and international institutions was the ocean, where words from Cantonese to Kari'nja were currency. The *lascars* (from Persian via Portuguese) of the Indian Ocean brought Calcutta's Maidan to London's docks and the Carib kenu birthed the familiar canoe. A boat (Anglo-Saxon) has no left nor right. Starboard (Old English *steorbord*) was named when boats had their rudder shipped to the right of the hull. The left side, against the wharf, became *port*.

Port and starboard direct the start of boat-poetry. 'Posh', with all its nuances, encapsulates Empire, class and navigation. On that colonial voyage to India and back, the cooler cabins were on port side going out and starboard coming home. (Etymologists dispute this provenance, but my mother, born in Kerala and relict of the Raj, was convinced of it.)

Sea talk is evolving code in the liminal intelligence of the decks, redolent as bilge-water of criss-crossing trade and ancient wars. The lachier *of Middle French, to lace or ensnare, becomes the lashings with rope and cord used every day afloat. The Admiral in his black broadcloth jacket and golden epaulettes takes his title from the Arabic* amir*, meaning commander.* Ahoy *was a Viking battle cry first and the imperative Mayday corrupts the French plea,* m'aidez*. Save me. Save us all.*

Leaving Cardiff, *Sea Dragon*'s engine overheats. We anchor and get the tools out. An eel has swum up the engine water intake. Dissected, plastic fills his stomach.

Beach-cleaning in Lamlash, we find a mysterious plastic tube. A six-year-old takes one look and recognises it has come from a vacuum cleaner.

Every loch on the Caledonian Canal has bottles floating in the water.

Nearly half a million nurdles – the plastic pellets from which objects are made – are found on a Fife beach as Storm Gert kicks up the seas off Kintyre.

We sail fast through the Farne Islands, where puffin numbers have dropped 12% in the last five years. Their main food, sand eels, is disappearing thanks to warming waters, over-fishing, and, yes, plastic in the food chain.

Twenty-five miles off Lowestoft an artificial sheen smears the calm North Sea. Four birthday balloons float, three plain silvers and a ‘2’. They’ve not been in the water long; the numeral shows plenty of purple. Left to float and crumble, these thin scraps would last longer than the child will live on land.

The Thames sees more returning life these days. Porpoises and seals, a seahorse at Greenwich, the occasional salmon. Yet the seaweed of the estuary is crunchy with microbeads. There are hundreds in every handful.

On *Sea Dragon* we trawl often, collecting samples to distribute to scientists at several universities. Magnified, every slide shows micro-plastic, the eroded, virulent fragments of our everyday lives.

Fibres, filaments, beads, thread, strands, tendrils. Wisps. Clusters, molecules, agglomerations, aggregates and assemblages. Scraps too small for the human eye, the fish or the albatross to see, small as plankton floating in the water column, on the surface and in the unlit depths, washed off our clothes and our teeth. It is reported that 3,500 pieces of plastic, including a shopping bag, were found nearly 11,000 meters below sea level in the Mariana Trench. Plastic is everywhere and invisible.

We are islands in the surrounding seas. Atlantic surf beats on Enesow Goonhyli, Na Blascaodaí and Shaetlan. The waters travel with us, from the robust Celtic Sea between Land’s End and marshy Corcaigh, up the Irish sea beating on County Wicklow and Ceredigion, and across the cardinal North. The same waves break on the goose-bedecked sandbanks of the Wash, that flooded littoral between the Humber and Cromer, and charge along the populist English Channel.

Capes and headlands stab out of the brown or green of mapped land into the blue and white of the sea. Admiralty charts are in lordly English but we can find the names of those who were here before and those who still abide. Ancient truths of landscape and tide glint in the deep beneath colonising Latin, Anglo-Saxon, Danish or French. Constrained by language, I cannot lay tongue to those beloved names in which the old tongues live, in Guernésias, Kernewek and Cymraeg, Y Ghailck and Gàidhlig, Pitmatic or Broad Norfolk. Their geography of the past is deep in the channels and intimate fringes passing our beam.

Vikings came here, saints left in their leather coracles, that Spanish Armada shattered on these rocks. The Atlantic convoy and centuries of merchant shipping haunt the sea-lanes. Fishing fleets have been busy, from log boats in the shadowy, shifting Fens to floating factories which never come home. The names echo in the ears of navigators and captains conning their course. Dungeness, Fanad Head, Carreg Ddu and Cape Wrath are turning points and watersheds, tidal gates and church-proud landmarks, stained with tight lines and anxious crosses, more potent than any mere border.

In these seas, monsters are not reserved in caricatured lochs. The Tearaght Rocks of the outermost west, Rhoscolyn, Corryveckan and Lindisfarne offer homes for sea-dragons, for monks and mermaids. Somewhere, Ceridwen stirs her cauldron in hope of wisdom. Ashrays and blue men haunt the racing waters of Scotland and the selkie's revenge remains a fearsome risk to lustful fishermen. The kraken waits.

Ghosts of lost lands toll their bells as we pass: Kenfig and the bloody fort of Rosláir, Ravenser Odd, Dunwich. The sea has taken them and their names no longer figure save as warning symbols on the chart. Waves gnaw at the cliffs and storms silt up river mouths, reshaping estuaries, shifting sandbars to invite the unwary into wrecks. No coastline is unchanged for long but

in this century our shores change faster than ever. From Fairbourne to Nigg Bay, St Osyth to Medmerry, we are managing retreat, surrendering land to warming seas and extreme weather. Still, the well-navigated, shallow craft may slip into the creeks and secret swatchways, hunting sanctuary or an unseen passage. Knowing the ropes is a life skill we might all acquire.

Left behind, left ashore, ye fair Spanish ladies. Dreaming, singing, distant and forlorn. Seawives and portwives bought from the bumboats or found in the harbour, and the wife back home. The receiving address for erratic prize money, etched on scrimshaw, a fading tattoo, a gasp in the night.

Afloat, we are bad luck, cursed, left off the muster. Invisible mothers to sons of guns and baby midshipmen. Sirens and mermaids and Rhine maidens, voices in the stars, faces in the waves, nymphs and virgins fallen to lie silver on the surface of the sea. Seahags, witches flying over water.

We are veiled, hidden, separate. Dangerous as the sea herself, as prone to drive a man mad with thirst and loneliness and unrequited desire to lay his head on lush, soft, stillness. Women have voyaged disguised in men's slops, passengers on the sacred quarterdeck, crouched behind curtains in diaspora holds, mere cargo. We are collateral damage in the deadly economies of the Triangle Trade or today's trafficked escapees from outsourced wars, from rapacious corruption and desertification.

It matters, to be women at sea.

Slivers of sisterhood lodge in my memory. Off Land's End someone gave me a blanket while I huddled in the sail locker, too seasick to move. Anchored in Lamlash Bay, *Sea Dragon*

rocked with obscene belly laughs at a slip of the tongue. Just how *do* you say *Clitus*? Three of us talked liberation and chocolate as dawn broke open the gaudy sky over the flexing, unbroken sea off Rattray Head. Coming under Tower Bridge, opened just for us, we were all moved; even our sober television presenter allowed a quiver of excitement into her narration.

Sailing with women is fun, friendly, less fraught with competition than mixed crews in my experience. There were moments of tension, of course, even conflict, during a long month in close quarters, with storms and sickness and a lot of hard work. Despite revelatory vegan cooking, I love cheese too much to leave it behind whatever the purists say. On every passage, with every woman, I shared some moment of joy.

A few of us remember, live in, have visited cleaner places. Not a world before plastic (none of us are that old), but a world before its ubiquity, beaches where the scourge is unseen and only the invisible filaments are lurking. Two of us have been to Antarctica where whaling boats and rusting oil drums remain and contemporary litter is creeping up the beaches. Some remember the careful wrapping of post-rationing picnics on windswept shingle. Wild swimmers talk about remote lakes, even in the British Isles, where the Little People might still be found and plastic has yet to leave a footprint we can see.

We salute the child rag-pickers of New Delhi, a hard life in a country with almost no infrastructure. We sorrow for Tonga, drowning under garbage thrown away by richer nations, and the choked drains of Indonesia or Malaysia, where no system exists to deal with the infection of convenience packaging. All of us are trying to live with a smaller footprint, all of us can name our compromises. As women do, we self-grade. '*Could do better*' and '*must try harder*.'

The network we create strengthens us during and after the voyage. We cheer each other on in prestigious conferences, congratulate ourselves on the momentum we helped to build,

offer advice for plastic-free weddings and translating banners into Welsh. Plastic is the epitome of a global problem susceptible to local action. Busy women, all of us, we get stuff done.

Nylon, polycarbonate (spectacles and riot-shields), bakelite, acrylic. Polyester (washing from your clothes), silicones, polyurethane, elastomers, polyethylene (lightweight shopping bags dropped in the gutter), polypropylene (that blue floating rope and disposable face masks). Polyvinyl chloride, polystyrene (white crumbs lodged between pebbles in the intertidal zone), polymethyl methacrylate, polyvinylidene chloride (cling-film on the sandwiches). Vinyl. Vulcanised rubber (shoe soles and mooring snubbers), and melamine formaldehyde. Butadiene (in those blue, latex-free gloves). Malemide.

Its names are legion.

Dover Strait is the busiest seaway in the world. I have sailed it a dozen times, but this is my first time outside the wrecking grounds of Goodwin Sands, skirting the edge of the shipping lanes. East Goodwin Light Vessel, the South-east and South Goodwin buoys slip past us as the sun sets over England. After the heat of London, we snuggle back into oilskins, make sure the next layer of fleece and a warm hat are close to hand. I forget my tablets and my stomach, lulled by two days tied up, rebels again. I find a bucket and tie it next to my bunk.

For our last night a haar rolls in from the North Sea. The wind drops, leaving a greasy, twisting swell. Sometimes sailing our archipelago becomes an endurance test. In between our tricks on the helm, we hunch over mugs, sipping at tea and chewing damp biscuits. I remember storytelling in Cardiff cafes and Scottish

pubs. We made art from plastic in Belfast and staged a future history event for the Edinburgh Fringe. People sought us out at every port, excited by our journey and interested in cleaner shores.

I recall the curious seal who wanted to watch us trawl in the middle of the Celtic Sea, making us wait nearly an hour before she got bored. My hands twitch in muscle memory of our exhilarating passage from Belfast to Arran, all sail up, swell and wind pushing us north. At times we were closer to Ireland or France than the UK. (*We are told the red line on the chart marks an international border. It is not painted on the water; you need mathematics and machines to know you are there.*) Back in salt water after the engineering wonders between Fort William and Inverness, Bass Rock gleamed in the sun from the wings and guano of the gannets.

Dolphins play in the stormy night-dark sea, the yellow streaks of their bellies a pale echo of the phosphorescent wake. In the old days, before the last war, their fins lined the horizon, edge to edge. I revisit an exquisite sunrise on a sad voyage four years ago, when Portland Bill's notorious flounce of overfalls and rip tides was uncannily calm. The Channel then was a mosaic of lozenges, ripples reflecting extravagant oranges and yellows defeating the wolfish clouds. Tonight, England's Cape Horn is invisible as we pass in dripping fog.

We re-enter Plymouth Sound in warm sunlight. It burns the back of my neck as I steer the boat from buoy to buoy while the skipper talks to the harbourmaster on the radio. Soon enough we will be through the lock, our warps tightened on cleats, the decks scrubbed and rucksacks back ashore.

We have crossed our wake, lain a lashing around the islands, one thread in a net which connects us all, gathers us together if

we choose. Saltwater cradles us and no wall we can build will hold back the tide for ever.

'Fog in the Channel, continent isolated.' *The old joke headline targets the xenophobia of little Englanders, not so funny now as nationalism rebuilds. The Channel is apostrophised as a moat, the guardian of the sceptred isle, though it is no more a static lake than Britain is a singular island. The tidal pendulum sways across us all. The Gulf Stream warming palm trees in Ayrshire and the cold reaches of the Peru-Humboldt Current alike are parts of the centrifugal turbulence of salt and heat, of krill and kelp and blue whales. Plastic is carried everywhere.*

The surrounding seas are beautiful still. They bind us, species to species, people to people, one to another. To our own magical, wild, pragmatic selves. We are antimony, quicksilver and gold. Platinum and salt.

Sarah Tanburn

Sarah Tanburn writes novels, stories, poetry, reviews and essays. Her work has been published widely, including *New Welsh Review*, *Ink Sweat & Tears* and www.nation.cymru. She is a PhD student at Swansea University, working on a historical maritime novel which draws on her experience at sea. Sarah spent many years travelling and now lives in South Wales.

Short Story Competition Winner

Silent Retreat

They take my phone away. Correction. They take my phone away, *snidely*. And, if they look at its contents, I'll be kicked out of here for crimes against hippie wokeness. My average step count is 2,062, I exclusively receive texts from Domino's Pizza and the last things I googled were:

Is silent retreat a cult
Do people go crazy on silent retreat
Do you have to be silent on silent retreat
What is silent retreat

I rap my knuckles against the reception desk as the retreat staff continue to sift through my belongings, removing my laptop, four books, a notepad, pens and a six-pack of Doctor Pepper. The sign next to me says, 'PLEASE KEEP NOISE TO A MINIMUM ON ARRIVAL'. I rap a little harder, the micro-rebellion thrilling me.

The tiny, red-headed manager looks at me with an unaffected expression.

'Mr Daniels, absolute silence commences in fifteen minutes.'

My eyes slide to her name tag. She's called Cedar. *Of course*, she is.

She pulls one final item from my case. The next sentence sling-shots out of me, devoid of dignity.

'Oh, come on, I'm not allowed HOB KNOBS?'

Stepping inside my sorry little shared room, I dig my palms into my temple. There's only thirteen minutes and twenty-two seconds left of allocated noise-making time. Yodel, recite

Shakespeare sonnets, burp the alphabet, I have to fill the silence with something.

Softly, I start singing the Flintstones theme tune.

–

Cedar issues instructions in a fuss-free room where the sole window overlooks the car park and a distant landscape of hills. I am now contractually silent.

'No communicating. No gesturing. No note writing. No distractions of any kind.'

Everyone sits cross-legged, absorbing her words with placid, plain-faced compliance.

'No eye contact.'

I shift my gaze down to nipple level, tugging self-consciously at my Bart Simpson t-shirt. The others are wearing loose, muted lounge clothes.

'No smoking. No photographs.'

Shifting on my mat, it feels like there are 77 different bones in my backside. I'm already stuck in a cycle of flinches and tics. Crick neck. Roll bad shoulder. Stretch back. Scratch ear. Clear throat. Repeat. At forty-five, sitting upright has become an endurance sport.

'No sleeping during meditations. No lateness. No harming of any living thing.'

My eyes, resting on the ridges of Cedar's sternum, flick upwards. She's so…blank. As if her pointy face is sheathed in ice.

'And no sexual contact.'

I envisage shagging her, cigarette hanging from my mouth, fly-swatter in each hand. Rules be damned.

'Take a moment to acknowledge the reason you are here.'

‘*It will be good for you to destress. Don’t worry about money. It’s my treat.’*

‘But–’

‘You’ve really enjoyed meditating recently.’

‘I–’

‘Gray…’ My wife’s voice flattens. The warmth cools. ‘You can’t carry on this way. And if you do, well…I won’t be able to stay and watch.’

On the mat, a grim smirk settles on my face. Surely, a week of silence will be better than admitting to my wife that when I lock myself in the study during the day, I’m *not* meditating. No. I’m alternating between drinking whisky, sending abusive emails to ex-work colleagues and watching YouTube videos about World War II.

And, hey, a silent retreat, how bad could it be? I thought it would give me time to work on my debut screenplay. Every now and then, I’m overcome with indignation that I haven’t won an Oscar, then I remember I’ve not written a single page yet. This retreat could be inspiring – perhaps one of the characters could be mute?

‘Congratulate yourself on being here. Acknowledge this moment. Think only of now,’ Cedar instructs.

There are no clocks on the bare walls, or indeed, anywhere.

‘Stay focused on the present. On every breath.’

I settle into my disgruntled lotus position as another small spasm jolts my lower back.

I sigh.

Surely, one hundred plus hours of silence will go by in a flash.

–

I flirt with myself in the bathroom mirror. A raised eyebrow. A mischievous twinkle. A wink. It's something to do. A face to interact with.

I already miss faces. Craggy, jowly ones. Shiny, red, pimply ones. Faces with freckles, faces with smoker's lines, faces with bad, botched Botox jobs.

Apparently, the no eye contact rule is to avoid a 'Vipassana Romance' where you fall for someone you've never even spoken to. Perhaps that's why, last night, I dreamt Cedar silently and sensually bathed me.

Outside, I can hear my roommate thumping around the bedroom. He's a heavy-set bloke, torso and arms coated in body-hair, who constantly emits non-regulation noises. Perhaps he's also here under marriage ultimatum duress or maybe he's genuinely loopy enough to consider this all worthwhile.

I wave at my reflection, conduct blinking contests, make ghastly faces, pick at blocked pores, create as many chins as possible. But, when I leave the room, I erase everything from my face and try to fade into the silence.

Right now, I look deep and hard into the mirror.

The man looking back purses his lips and shakes his head at something only he can see.

–

Yet again the words 'SUNRISE MEDITATION' stare at me sternly from the chalkboard. I've already lost count of what day it is. The gong thrash that awoke me at 4am reverberates in my head as I join the slow shuffle into the room. This retreat is grinding us, glacially, towards either enlightenment or exhaustion.

My body locks into place on the mat and Cedar's small feet patter past me. Before I can digress into my latest sexual fantasy,

I'm interrupted by a loud sound powering from the speakers. Several bodies jump and a woman squawks in shock.

The noise happens again. And again. Despite this unpleasantness, the room quickly resumes its unspoken, collective pretence that this is all *totally* normal. Eventually, it becomes clearer that the noises are pre-recorded instructions from a shrill male voice.

'Visualise your loved one smiling in front of you,' it tells us. 'Sit with your loved one in this moment. Be still.'

The woman to my right starts to weep. I resist the urge to roll my eyes, glancing up at Cedar and her pinched, still mouth. As the crying intensifies, so does Cedar's mulish serenity. Eventually, the woman flees the room and the silence seems to push the walls of the room wider. Figuring it might fill five minutes, I nod my head and rock forward, as if to propel myself into the task. I manage to conjure up my dead mother's misshapen blue sweater and a pair of plimsolls. Then she appears, shrivelling in that hospital bed, looking at me with those hollowed, helpless eyes.

I abruptly move on.

My wife. Ah, of course, *my wife.* She should have been my first choice. She appears, wearing that black negligee of hers. Arms folded, eyes hooked wide, she taps her toe with a passive-aggressive force that makes her breasts jostle. I fear she can tell my commitment to the retreat has been minimal.

I try to envisage a different loved one.

Perhaps my father? Although that's less love and more reluctant tolerance. Any friends? Nope, none come to mind.

My wife's voice forces its way back into my head. 'Why are you not thinking of our *child?*'

I dismiss her again. I worry where that path might lead.

'Open up the palms of your hands towards your loved one,' says the pre-recorded voice.

But there's no one in front of me to open my palms towards. No one safe. I let my mind ebb back into thoughts of noiseless sex with Cedar, envisaging us quietly climaxing in the other's shuddering, sweaty arms.

Then, I hear a small meep. I recognise the sound instantly and I'm appalled. Padding into my consciousness comes a static-furred, black kitten. Tina. Huh. I haven't seen her since I was…eight?

She looks at me with green orb-like eyes that take up two thirds of her small skull.

The voice says again to wish our loved one happiness. I do. I wish Tina that. I fall victim to my aversion to sentimentality's pet-sized loophole. For about seventy-five seconds, I think of only Tina the kitten. I focus on her as she licks her paw then rubs it over her cheeks and wiry whiskers. I tell Tina the kitten – a forty-year-old furry memory – to be prosperous, safe and fulfilled.

Then, my mind snaps off its leash. I think about Tina Turner. Then James Bond. Then my favourite action sequences. Then sport. Then football. I think about my work's five-a-side team. I remember that goal I scored from the other end of the pitch. I remember the text I sent the group chat after I was sacked. Nobody replied. I think about how they're getting on without me. Probably fine. My work, my wife – everybody is probably enjoying the quiet.

Tina lets out one final meep.

–

Back hunched on the dining room benches, I look out the window at the grey fog obscuring the endless green hills. I'm considering doing a runner to the nearest pub but I'd almost certainly have a heart-attack during any lengthy escape into the wilderness.

I wonder if I'm indoctrinated yet. If, when the wolves descend on my exhausted, helpless body, I'll remember to scream or if I'll telepathically wish them prosperity and happiness as they tear off my flesh.

I feel a hand rest on my shoulder. This, we have been informed, is the severest behaviour warning of all. *What could I possibly have done wrong now?* Yesterday, I was shoulder-tapped for laughing during a 'flower breathing' session when a daffodil petal wedged itself in my left nostril.

A staff member's hand points to a sign on the wall.

'PLEASE CHEW MINDFULLY (20 - 40) TIMES.'

I look down at my plate of mashed potato, lentil beans and broccoli. In the silence, it feels as if every flaw, every fucked-up thing about me is exacerbated and exposed. Even my gluttony.

I take a slow, remorseful bite. Who knew blandness could be so overwhelming? I guess the more depressed our tastebuds are, the less our tongues will care to facilitate speech.

–

I can't remember what my voice sounds like. During my umpteenth 'meditation walk', while staring vacantly at a glistening spider's web, I half-convince myself I'm Australian or maybe Portuguese.

But – I move onto studying the dew droplets that sit like watery pimples on the branches – is the voice in my head *even* me? And, am I actually *hearing* the voice in my head? Can thoughts make noise? Is this thought, this very thought right now, coming to me through a filter of sound? Everything suddenly feels formless and futile – my thoughts are just a sketch on a pane of misted glass. I bat at the branches and watch the water spray onto the grass and the spiderweb shudder in the commotion.

Was my real voice annoying? Nasal? Did I always talk as much as I think? My thoughts are relentless, inconsequential, inappropriate and often just plain *boring*. Like my internal diatribe this morning about how porridge looks like hummus but hummus doesn't look like porridge. I never catch myself contemplating politics or potential charitable endeavours. Am I always like this? My poor wife. No wonder she sent me here.

I complete my seventeenth lap of the small hedged garden then head inside to aimlessly wander the halls.

–

'What would you like to discuss, Mr Daniels?' Cedar's voice is frail, devoid of substance, as if it's frittering away from lack of use.

'Please,' I lean forward and give her my most winning smile. 'Call me Graham. Or Gray.'

These are the first words I have spoken in who knows how many days. They feel cumbersome, leaden – and sound surprisingly English.

'Mr Daniels, this session lasts five minutes. I can only answer questions about your engagement with the retreat.'

I sit back and my plastic seat creaks. I've always been too late to the sign-up sheet to get a one-to-one session with Cedar. But, finally, here we are, sitting together in a glorified cupboard. Realising she is, for whatever reason, feigning resistance to my charm, I switch into my more natural mode. That of belligerent middle-aged man.

'Well…'

I take an irritation-fuelling inhale.

'My back is aching, the food is diabolical, the meditations are mind-numbing and my roommate seems to be allergic to showering.'

Cedar, unblinking, says nothing.

‘What can you do about these things? These things that “pertain to my engagement with the retreat”? You surely have a responsibility to keep guests from going insane with boredom and pain?’

She looks at me for a long time, unmoved, as ever.

‘If pain is in your present, then acknowledge it. Accept it. Whether painful or pleasurable, both will pass.’

‘What on earth does that mean?’

‘If you reflect on my words, you’ll find…’

‘No. No reflecting. All I do is reflect. This is talking time. Talk to me.’

‘Silence allows you to keep your mind on only the now.’

‘But there’s nothing going on in the now. I can’t switch off. And I know what you’re going to say…It’s not about “switching off”. I should be switching *on*. Listening to my body. To the sound of my knees cracking or whatever. But – I can’t. I think constantly. Relentlessly. Yesterday, I ran through the entirety of *Coming To America* line by line, just to pass the time.’

Cedar laces her thin fingers together as I drag my own large, useless hands across my face.

‘Why aren’t you talking?’ I let out a muffled wail, my face squished into my hands. ‘Say something.’

I look up to see Cedar’s head tilt. Finally, an expression – a quizzical one – pulses across her face.

‘Ask yourself why you are afraid of silence.’

I laugh. ‘Sorry?’

‘What are your words trying to protect you from?’

I look away, noticing the laminated photos of meadows on the walls. I think about work. About being escorted off the premises. I think about my dead mother. About my wife. About the pregnancy. I quickly think about tiny Tina the kitten.

‘I’ve had quite the year or two.’ I try to smile but my face feels like an elevator caught between floors.

I clear my throat.

‘How long do I have left?’

‘Twenty seconds.’

‘No – no. I mean how many days left on the retreat?’

The alarm buzzes and her hand extends to the door.

–

I inhale deeply and try to do as the pre-recorded voice instructs. *‘Follow your loved one, wherever they want to take you.’* Tina slinks behind a wheelie bin. My subconscious/spirit-guide-kitten is navigating me through actual garbage. Am I *that* embarrassingly literal?

On my mat, I sniff up a perilously low-hanging snot. I move the bin to find her chewing at the remains of a Sainsbury’s chicken sandwich. I feel bad, I should imagine some Whiskas or something for her. I root around for a better offering. When I open the bin’s lid there’s a smashed-up computer, a copy of my wife’s latest self-help book, and piles of rotting baby-teeth.

I hate my mind.

I look back down at Tina. She’d been a birthday present and slept on my knee when I watched TV. I’d not had a pet since.

I feel my grip tightening on the bin’s grimy lid.

From the ground, she cocks her head inquisitively.

I force out a shrug.

Her green eyes blink slowly.

I shake my head.

She returns to eating her pre-packaged chicken.

–

I zone out during a sunset meditation.

I think…nothing. No sexual deviancy, no self-hatred, no convoluted plot twists for my screenplay, no palm-sized kittens.

I am voided. Gone. It could be one minute, maybe ten, who knows? There are no clocks, no calendars, just gongs.

As I come to, I reacquaint myself with my surroundings, the faceless bodies and their various breaths, the white walls, the waning sun struggling to fleck colour across the sky. And I realise things are different. Somehow. Perhaps it's because there's a tight, squeezed sensation deep in the centre of my stomach. Perhaps, it's because I'm actually acknowledging that feeling. I think it's been there a while. Or, perhaps, as irritation seeps back into my every pore, it's because there's a *pneumatic drill pulverising concrete outside.*

Yep, that's it. That's the source of the sound rattling every inch of my skull.

I look out the window in disbelief just as a yellow JCB has the audacity to trundle past. I pull my hands to my temples. The others rock on their mats with quivering eyelids.

Cedar catches my eye. I hold her gaze in protest. I even dare to shake my head. Somehow her stretched face tightens even further. I am mere moments away from a disapproving shoulder tap of doom and I don't care. She has ruined my moment of meditative triumph when, briefly, I was detached from the misery of being me.

As the gong sounds to announce the session's end, Cedar stands up.

'I would just like to remind guests,' she speaks in her whittled, whispered way. 'That a meditative state can be achieved in *any* environment.' Her eyes narrow as she looks right at me. 'And do remember this retreat was significantly discounted due to compulsory building work.'

I squirm in my lotus position as the clatter of building work continues outside. I think about my wife clicking 'purchase' on her budget marriage saver. Couldn't she have bought a round of

golf for my father and I instead? There'd have been even less talking during that.

As I allow myself a bitter inward laugh, my father's response to my sacking springs into my head.

'I'm glad your mother's not here to see you like this…All this failure.'

Unhappily, I'm plugged back into the neuroses of my mind.

–

My urge to complain is all-consuming. There's no sign-up sheet for one-to-ones with Cedar today but I still barge open the small cupboard door. One of the retreat participants, a mousy-haired woman in her twenties, looks up at me from the floor. She has a mobile phone in one hand and an Oreo cookie in another. Quickly, she stuffs both into her bra.

'Please don't tell anyone…'

I wave sternly at her chest area, indicating for her to hand it over.

'There's no signal. I was just looking at photos. I swear. Please don't–'

I cut her off by pointing, once again, to her breasts. My eyes have become so manic they are causing me physical pain. I mimic biting on an Oreo. Fearfully, she reaches in and takes out the biscuit.

'It's half-eaten.'

I look pointedly to my hand and, finally, she gives me the food. For forty gloriously mindful chews, she watches me eat her snack.

Now I understand why they've been torturing us with such dry, plain food. The combination of sugar, trans-fat and more sugar fires up my body, makes me even more determined to dismantle Cedar and her stupid, insufferable silent regime. Why on earth have I been abiding by these pointless rules? What part

of listening to a kaftan-wearing white woman chant and bang a bowl is going to save my marriage? And so, I conclude, I'm going to the pub. And I know just the people to get me there.

–

I head outside to see that I've missed the start of today's sunset meditation walk. That's always the most exciting part of the whole enterprise – shall we plod clockwise or anti-clockwise around the shrubs? At the corner of the building, the walkers shuffle past the construction workers' station. I can already make out their gruff, deep voices. I narrow my eyes and consider the approach that will ensure that, by the end of the evening, I'm stowed away in one of their boots, on the way to the local tavern. Joining the walkers, I listen closely as the men talk and drill and talk and drill.

'When are we clocking off?' one asks. 'The sun's going.'

'Shall we call it a day? I gotta get back to put the little one to bed.'

'Never thought I'd see the day.'

'Well, it'll be you soon enough.'

'Aye, she's due any day now.'

I speed up, body-checking a meditator out my way. Next time I near the workers they'll be talking about football or Brexit or their bowel movements, surely. Something more palatable.

'He was tiny when he was born but on the scan they said he was a big baby. You never know, mate.'

'EXCUSE ME.'

They look around. I'm standing, right eye twitching, in between two miserable little shrubs.

'EXCUSE ME.'

I march up to them. I've forgotten how to manage my volume. Words keep fog-horning out of me.

'EXCUSE ME.'

My face is pink and swollen as I splutter into their shocked faces.

'EXCUSE ME.'

I say this over and over, again and again, with floundering, fish-on-a-hook eyes.

'You alright, mate?' one asks eventually.

That's what my colleagues asked me just before I smashed my work computer against the meeting room's glass wall.

'No. No, I'm not alright,' I said matter-of-factly. Far from it. I'd come home from hospital five months earlier with nothing to do except search for miniature-sized coffins. But I couldn't bring myself to explain that, so, I just hurled the machine and watched as it split open then hit the floor. The exposed silver wires sparked like gasps of breath.

'Excuse me…' This time the words stammer out. My eyes dart to each man. One can't help but laugh as he shakes his head.

Swollen with indignity, I step forward, closer and closer, until I'm right up into his smug face. I move my index finger slowly up to my lips.

'Shhhhhhh,' I hiss. My eyes never leave his.

It works. He stops smiling. Nobody talks. Nobody laughs. Order – that is, silence – is resumed.

I turn away from them and walk back to the garden, my whole body sparking and spluttering, like that shattered computer on the floor.

–

I sit down a little too roughly onto my mat.

‘Visualise someone you love.’ Same old, same old, bla bla, inner peace, bla.

I’m distracted by the pound of my heartbeat, in my chest, my neck, my stomach, my feet. It’s everywhere, incessantly knocking, commanding attention. I hear the sounds of car engines as the workers drive away for the day. I hear the sound of steps and muffled voices outside the room.

This time, the pre-recorded voice tells us to visualise a loved one wishing *you* well. Imagine the loved one saying to *you*, ‘be prosperous, safe and fulfilled’.

I try. My wife is up first, back in her negligee. She’ll just ask why I’ve got a bloody nose. Wait. I bring my hand up to my face. I don’t have a bloody nose. That was before. When I was sacked. When I called my boss a ‘cretinous arse-licker’. Pretty sure I swung for him first. Or maybe he did. Either way, only he connected.

My father appears, disappointment personified, his manhood affronted by the fact I’m ‘doing that namby, pamby feelings crap’. I feel the sensation of trickling blood and, again, my hand moves to my nose. Nothing.

My ex-work colleagues appear. Hilarious. My dying mother appears. Not so hilarious. I lick my upper lip three, four times. It’s dry. My dying mother offers me a tissue but she does *not* offer me any mantra of wellness.

I try visualising Cedar then my flatulent roommate then the guy at the corner shop where I buy my whisky. Nobody wants to wish me well. Not even my reflection in the bathroom, with blood streaming from my nose, will wish me well.

Then, of course, my little Tina appears. Tina. You’ve been good to me. You listen and don’t judge. You’ll wish me prosperity, safety, fulfilment, the lot.

The kitten slow-blinks with her trusting eyes and a chill etches its way across my body. The imaginary blood coating my nostrils dries.

I know why Tina is a kitten and not a cat.

I am eight years old in my memory. My mother is healthy. But the kitten is not. It's so small. The vet says we were sold her too young, she shouldn't have been removed from her mother, she'll need to be provided with milk all the time. We have a schedule. I sit and watch her lap from the syringe. She lies in my hand, shows me her pink, stretched stomach, her little paws reach out and grip around my finger. But, one morning, I come downstairs and Tina is small and stiff on the kitchen floor.

Back in my stupid, self-indulgent visualisation, Tina is looking right at me. Her big eyes are so bright. When she was dead, they were different. Evacuated. Glassy. But, for me, right now, they crackle with feelings and life. She's wishing me things. Things I don't deserve.

We wrapped her in one of my t-shirts and put her in a shoebox in the garden.

There's a hand on my shoulder. Cedar's. As her fingertips press into my skin, I let out something trapped between a shudder and a cry. I put my hand on top of hers to show my gratitude that someone is here for me.

'Mr Daniels.' She leans down and her breath swirls in my ear. 'Please come with me.'

–

She walks me to the small cupboard. Inside, there's a serious-looking, large man standing in the corner. Cedar and I sit down.

'Mr Daniels, you are welcome to talk from this point on.'

I don't say anything. My whole body feels in motion, like the slosh of the sea. I can still picture Tina's tiny frame all stretched out, the fur on her body still soft despite the rigidity of her frame.

'We have to ask you to leave.'

I look at her vacantly.

'There have been multiple rule infringements. And now I have been informed of an altercation with the construction staff.'

I shake my head, hold up my hands.

'Mr Daniels, I don't understand what you're trying to tell me. You are welcome to talk.'

I look at her, brow furrowed.

'Mr Daniels, you are allowed to speak.'

I cross my arms and continue to shake my head. I will not speak, not now, not after, finally…feeling.

'Mr Daniels, this would be a lot easier if you accepted our decision and–'

I put my hands to my forehead and slouch forward into my lap. This has to be a test. This can't be it. I push myself upright and try to explain. I make a gesture to create Tina and I pat her imaginary body. I mime suckling at a milk bottle. I try to communicate through elaborate, wild, emphatic gestures that now is not a good time to be forced to make any kind of noise, that I have just hit upon something meaningful. That silence is important. To me. Right now. Necessary. I need it.

The man in the corner and Cedar look at each other. Again, I get the dreaded shoulder tap.

'Mr Daniels, let's go pack. Your wife is on her way to collect you.'

I look at Cedar in disbelief. Tina's wish of prosperity, fulfilment and happiness can't have been in vain. I have to try to get better. I have to fix myself. Fix my marriage.

I jerk my shoulder to get the man's hand off me. I try, one final time, to get them to understand. I mime the drilling, the flatulent roommates, the Doctor Pepper confiscations, the sore backs, the woman stuffing Oreos into her bra, the monotony, the nipple-gazing, the computer smashing, the dead kitten in my T-shirt being placed in the ground, the football matches at work, the punch up with my boss, the drinking in the study, the sheer volume of war documentaries I've recently watched and then I'm gesturing about my wife, about her pregnancy, about the scans, about the nerves and the excitement of finally becoming parents so late in life, so unexpectedly, and then I'm gesturing – gesturing because there are no words I can use to articulate the horror – about our son slipping from between her legs, still and silent. And I'm crying. Noisily, messily crying for the very first time since we lost our boy.

–

I sit outside the retreat, drinking a warm can of Doctor Pepper. I watch the sun setting and try to count the shades of orange as they blend and blur into the sky. My phone, still turned off, sits by my side. It's so quiet, I can hear the sound of the leaves in the breeze and the distant clank of cutlery in the retreat's dining room. I can hear my own breath and the tick of my pulse. A pulse I have that my son does not.

My wife will be here soon. I try to think of what to say to her. But nothing comes to my mind.

Emma Grace Brankin

Emma is a teacher from Glasgow, Scotland, who now lives in London, England. She has a Masters in Creative Writing and Education from Goldsmiths College, University of London. She

was recently shortlisted for the *Bridport Prize's Short Story Contest* as well as winning *Fugue Fiction's Short Story prize* and the *To Hull And Back Short Story contest*. Other work has appeared in places such as *Reflex*, *X-Ray Literary Magazine* and *Maudlin House*. You can contact her on Twitter via @emmanya.

Short Story Competition Runner-up

Uhtceara

I lie in the dark and consider the issue of my list. So far, you would be losing. You would be surprised by that, I think, and that would probably be another entry into the 'con' column; your lack of awareness. But I have not officially started my list-making yet and I should not admit half-considered entries. Not on a subject of such importance. That would be unfair.

Before I engage with the list question, I allow myself to listen to the hum of the fridge-freezer. It has been a good investment, perhaps the best I have ever made. It has more storage space than the old one. Much more – it is twice the size. I will make my money back on it within two years through all the batch-cooking it will let me do. I could probably do it even quicker if we stopped getting takeaways, maybe within 18 months, but you said it was important to live a little. You can't take it with you, David. That's what you said. But that depends on where you're going, doesn't it? Beyond the grave? No. Beyond Margate? Yes.

I wonder if, post-list, I would get to keep the fridge. I did buy it after all. I don't think you even like it – I've never heard you say anything about its ice cube function, for example. Not even last Friday when I made us drinks at five o'clock and put yours next to your laptop and said, ice! You didn't seem to think that was a strange thing to say, when really it was quite strange. Especially as it was the first word we had exchanged since lunch. I'm not well-versed in Inuit culture, or in the culture of anywhere beyond the south coast really, but I'd be surprised if "ice!" was an accepted conversation starter even in places where the cold is normal. You didn't remark upon it, though. Perhaps because you didn't try your drink until the ice was gone and the glacé cherry was floating in a warm, lime green bath with a salted rim. Like some sort of alcoholic, volcanic vent. When you did try it, you

made a bit of a face, and I thought, really?, and, that's not very grateful, but I didn't say anything because although you had your headphones on, and although they were the noise reduction ones I got you at Christmas, I could still hear how unhappy Tim was with your team.

I wonder what Tim would say when you told him. Perhaps you wouldn't tell him? You're all home-based since they closed the office so it might not come up until you had your quarterly sales meeting in Hastings. And you might have found someone new by then. Or be happily single. You might give in to Tim's requests to join him on a night out rather than telling him that you have plans and then coming back to me and to Margate, to our battered sofa and tiny TV. That should probably be a pro, that you always choose to be at home rather than elsewhere, but I need to give it some proper thought.

Because the other side of that, of course, is that we don't ever go anywhere. There might not be many places to go in Margate, but now that summer is nearly here, it would be nice to think that we might do things. Coastal things. Walks, even. Nothing that costs. None of the kayaking and paddle boarding and kite surfing that seems to have popped up overnight, with 5% body fat and year-round tans, all clad in neoprene and with such certainty about its place in the world. None of that, no. A walk and some talking, that would do me. Maybe stopping at one of the huts if it's warm and sharing a 99. Although the gulls might come for that and I really don't like them, so I'd probably rather just have some own-brand on the sofa. That'd be fine. Nice, even. But we need to do something, some things – you always choosing to be here feels like less of a pro when you never want to be anywhere else.

You're stirring now and so I am lying still, holding a breath. I hope I have not been talking out loud again. I think you're just having a fidget. Yes, here comes your arm across me, and with it your scent. Thick, heavy and masculine, and fine, I'll admit it,

sexy. It shouldn't be. When we lived on Clifton Street, on the ground floor and with our bedroom facing the road, we couldn't have the window open. I slept a little better back then and our toilet was down the hall, next to the kitchen-lounge, so when I came back in after my second pee, at about 5am, I would get the accumulated smells of the night and you should know that it was beyond ripe. That should have ruined your scent for me, but it hasn't.

I have always liked the heat of you, the way you radiate throughout the night, a six-foot furnace simmering beneath the sheets. And now we have a bedroom on the third floor, with a window that faces onto the communal paving, the context of your scent has changed. The window can only open a fraction, 10cm or so, but that is enough to keep the room a little fresher and when you move in the night, especially if you lift an arm, I get a whiff of you and I am undone. I can smell what you haven't been able to or haven't wanted to tell me about your day, or at least the emotional signature of it, the emotional impact. I feel so close to you then, so intimate, as though you are finally sharing yourself with me. If I do make a list, your night scent will be my first pro and I'm not even going to apologise for that.

The motor on the fridge-freezer has just whirred into action again. You turn away from the noise, your back to me, and sleep on. The old fridge-freezer was much louder. You made me close the kitchen door because of its 'whining' – that's what you called it. This one's too quiet to intrude on your sleep, so I get to listen to the hum and I like that because I can use the sound however I like. Sometimes I use it as white noise, drowning out specificity and just allowing myself to be a person, no, less specific than even that, a body, a weight, a weight in a bed, suspended, with no thinking to be done or decisions to be made. I am just here and that is all I owe to myself. To you.

At other times, I use the fridge's hum as a reminder of what it is to be certain about something; that change is needed

sometimes and that I am capable of making it happen. The hum also reminds me what a good return on investment looks like. Even if it didn't have double the storage, or the retro 1950s looks, the fridge is double A-rated. Our old one was a D. You didn't care when I said that that was embarrassing. We all need to do our bit for the environment, I said, where is the point of recycling our bottles and things when we have Mr CFC chugging away right next to the council's colour-coded bags? You didn't reply. We even had that guide white-tacked to the door for a while, but I took it down when I realised that you were never going to sort the rubbish. So I peeled off the white-tack, put that back into its packet, and then the guide went into the blue bag (cardboard and paper).

Where is the motor's hum taking me tonight? Or is it this morning already? It could be. In my mind, mornings start earlier now, at 4am. That is a change I have made based on what that jockey said on television the other day, when you were flicking between channels, looking for something to fill another shapeless Saturday. She was doing a bit to camera and some unseen reporter with a lovely deep voice asked her if Cheltenham meant spring for her too. She said that no, spring was when she got to the yard and it was already light. The reporter asked what time she got up. About four, the jockey said – a bit smugly if I'm being honest – and as I don't think jockeys are night workers, or shift workers, that has changed my understanding of when morning starts, rolling it back by an hour and making me feel less insane when I lie awake and wonder which day I'm filling with my jumbled thoughts about lists and fridges.

It must be about that now, I think. Four. Or maybe even later. The sky is certainly lightening and normally I would check my watch, flash the backlight on with a quick press, but you have pinned my left arm with your shoulder and I don't want to risk waking you. Instead, I will watch the sky. If it is clear at sunrise

then I'll know where I am; the BBC said the sun was due at 05:01 today.

Before you came to bed last night, I read the instruction manual for the fridge-freezer again. I understand most of it now; as you said, it's not complicated, but I want to be prepared in case she should break. Some of the reviews said that this model broke all the time, and that one poor man seemed to have had an awful run – you remember, he left all those reviews on Amazon and you spent a Sunday morning reading them to me in bed, doing your best Larry Grayson impression until I had to beg you to stop because I thought my laughter was going to give me an asthma attack – but ours has been as good as gold so far. If she did go though, I'd want to fix her. Not just because of the cost of an engineer, although that doesn't help, but also because her night time hum is such a comfort for me and I'd like to return the favour. Hence reading the manual. That's also why I cooked all the fish fingers and chips the other night – we'd crammed too much into the freezer and the door would barely shut. I felt bad for her, and then I felt bad when I threw those last fingers away but you said you were stuffed and I'm trying to lose a bit of weight, what with summer coming.

That might be a con, I think. That you don't seem to care about how I look. Obviously, that's my responsibility really, not yours, but it would be nice to have some support, or even some criticism. Some engagement. I'm never going to look like those neoprene men, even if they invented a wet suit which was shaping somehow, contouring, but I could look better than this if you wanted me to. If you helped me to. And if we stopped getting takeaways.

But the sun is here now, so I'm going to stop thinking about the list. I've reached three possible cons before dawn, and they again outnumber the probable pluses. To be fair, one of the pluses, your smell, is a definite plus, but it was also yesterday's plus, and last Tuesday's too. Your Larry Grayson impression

would also be a definite plus, but somehow that was a year ago now, that morning. That laughter. So I don't know if I could count it, which leaves me at three new cons and no new pluses.

They're all still maybe cons, of course, and not just today's, all of them; I haven't given any of them enough thought yet and I might feel differently if I was writing the list for real. Which I think I should. Not today, I'm going to be too tired, but perhaps this weekend? I could do it whilst you watch TV. I could sit in here and if you agree to put your headphones on, I could listen to the hum of the fridge-freezer and that would help my thinking. Then I could make the list, followed by a decision, and we could move on with our lives, one way or another.

You have left the curtains open again (con, and I'm not sure that needs much further consideration, but I would put it through due process, I promise – I won't be rash) so the morning's light is on your skin, in your hair, turning your stubble golden. And you are beautiful. You must have felt my eyes on you because you have turned over, and now you're putting your hand out to my face, putting your fingers in my hair. You are smiling at me. You ask if I have been awake for long and your thumb strokes my cheek as you say that I look tired. Your eyes are soft and kind and clear. I wonder what goes on in that head of yours, David Murray, you say. Oh, I start to reply, not much. But you are already on your way to the bathroom and so I lie here, listless.

E.J. Fry

E.J. Fry lives, works and writes in London, England. This year he was longlisted for the *Cambridge Short Story Prize* and has work forthcoming in *JuxtaProse.*

Flash Fiction Competition Winner

Feathers to Make Wings

Everyone at the writers' workshop is chatting. I'm new. Clutching my notebook, I join the circle of self-consciousness and plastic chairs.

The woman next to me says, 'Hi, I'm Annie.'

Annie doesn't recognise me, but my hair is short now and I'm a stone heavier. It's been twenty years since we last spoke, and she's probably swatted that time away like a nuisance fly.

Annie asks me how long I've been writing. For years, I reply. Therapeutically. She tells me she started writing when her son moved out. I know that was twenty years ago.

Jane, the workshop leader, emerges from the community centre kitchen with a tray of juice and biscuits. She offers round the tray and greets me.

'Can you introduce yourself to the group?' Jane asks.

I'm confident Annie won't recognise my name. 'I'm Kathryn,' I say. 'I'm a retired social worker. I love turning my observations into stories and I enjoy reading Wyndham.'

Everyone starts discussing cosy catastrophe. I watch Annie in my peripheral for signs of recognition. She chews a custard cream and says she's never heard of Wyndham. I relax my grip on my notebook.

Kevin, a bearded man in a collared shirt shares his poem about a train journey to Norfolk. His description is beautiful, and he's given feedback on his repetition of words like 'sprawling' and 'green'.

Annie goes next. Hers is an extract from her erotic novel. Her tongue relishes and savours each rough and sexual word. Kevin clears his throat and Jane picks her fingers. I join everyone else in staring at the floor, hoping it will be over soon. When Annie

is done, Jane offers some critique on pacing. Everyone else nods and smiles.

Then it's my turn to share my work.

The boy speaks to me, his voice small. He tells me that he wishes he could fly.

'On a plane?' I ask.

'No, with wings of my own.'

His voice gets bigger as he tells me how he'd fly to an island and build a nest in a tree. The birds would be his friends, and he and they would sing to the sky about how happy flying made them.

He'd live on an island because the monster can't swim. Sometimes the monster tricks him with hugs, but then bites and scratches, and turns his skin purple. If he had wings, he could fly back to his island if the monster came too close.

I tell him that I have feathers to make wings. I can show him this new landscape where he can make a new home. His voice is small again.

'No, the monster would be sad,' he says.

But I have already begun to fix the wings to his back and take him to the water's edge, where the monster can't swim.

I'm finished.

'I can't swim either,' laughs Annie. 'Sorry, Kathryn, it's a bit weird, I'm not sure I get it.'

No, I think. *I'm sure you don't.*

Rebecca Klassen

Rebecca Klassen is a freelance editor and has a first-class Master's degree in Creative and Critical Writing. Her short stories have been published in *Graffiti Magazine* and anthologies for *The Worcestershire Literary Festival*, University of Gloucestershire, *Glittery Literary* and the *Dean Writers Circle*. She has won a short story prize at the *Coleford Festival of Words*. Rebecca has performed her work at the Cheltenham Literature Festival and Cotswold Playhouse, where she was a winner of *Stroud Short Stories competition*.

Mini Saga Competition Winner

If I could I'd tell him

That the home we so nearly wrecked became, eventually, a happy one. That I'm thankful every day he somehow mustered the courage. That walking our old river paths, memories still come to me like found gemstones that I hold to the light in awe.

Lesley Evans

Lesley Evans is retraining as a storyteller after a first career as a lawyer and business leader. She is currently studying for an MA in Creative and Critical Writing at the University of Gloucestershire. She writes mainly micro flash and flash fiction and has been published in three competition anthologies and on a number of flash fiction websites.

The Little Wild

The ‘Little Wild’ is what she called it – and it shall be ours forever.

We had bought the farmhouse when we finally had had enough of the city (Poppy agreed, the city had become too dangerous and noisy). As we were both older, without children, having met later in life at the Popular Culture Association Conference in Boston, we were both determined to make our soon encroaching senior years as enjoyable as possible. We made for an unlikely couple what with Poppy’s paper on psychoanalytic theory and gender in fairy tales while my own talk was a stump speech for the Graduate Program in library science we offered at Northwestern. We bonded on archival methods, preservation, organisation, and best practices marrying almost a year to the date of our first encounter. No odder couple had there perhaps been. We were visually unique as well. She, Rubenesque and committed to smoking a pack a day while I maintained the thin physique that I had championed while at school. Poppy would tease me as the ‘*Jack Sprat the boy who would eat no fat*’ nursery rhyme hero and I was too polite to ever voice her comparison.

We were both in our late forties when we finally moved to the country and bought the large, old farmhouse that had been abandoned by its previous owners which needed some work before it could be occupied. The house was a mess of disrepair and neglect but Poppy was determined to make it into something beautiful. She took on the restoration project with gusto while I busied myself at my job as a senior archivist at Northwestern University Library’s Special Collections Department. I had worked there since graduating from university (the same one where Poppy studied it turned out) having spent several years working on my master catalogue on the variant manuscripts and

publications of George McDonald. His ‘Golden Key’ was the basis of my theory to the princesses, giants, and fae who gambolled through his writings.

Together, in our new home, we both worked diligently to put everything to order. I sanded, plugged, and painted inside while Poppy took on the front garden. We both agreed that the garden acreage in the back of the house was best left as is. Originally the farm had boasted a small greens and herbs bounty that had exploded into a warren of wild, overlapping vegetation. Thick snarls of basil, celery, and lettuce we were stumped to identify (I found it finally – flashy trout back) had swallowed the full garden with a thick entangled row of white ash soaring above us at the edge of the property. All of the original farmland had been sold off and developed into housing plots that loomed around us and the area we now called ‘The Little Wild’.

I spent a lot of time out there, sitting on the back porch facing the overgrown garden looking up at the night sky. The air was so clear here that I could see all of the stars each evening.

‘You’re not afraid to be alone out here?’ Poppy asked one night as she joined me by my side. ‘I mean, you don’t feel like you need someone else around.’

She put her hand on mine where it rested on my knee and squeezed gently. ‘It’s okay if you are,’ she said softly, but firmly.

‘No,’ I replied.

Unlike Poppy, I saw no gossamer strands of mystery here or anything to worry about. I was content living in our idyllic home with Poppy by my side and had no fear of the unknown or metaphysical wonders at work in the dark. Here, in the peace of our home, I could ponder the play and nonsense of McDonald’s work as I rejoiced in the peace and quiet. Poppy’s study, in the spare bedroom upstairs, was where she wrote and dreamed and lived with the myriad of creatures that made up her life’s work. As a bibliophile, all I needed were my books and the serenity of our farm. Wrapped in a blanket on the back porch as I graded

papers, Poppy would slip out to smoke, having agreed that cigarettes inside was a to-be-avoided decision. I abandoned my study of syntax, language, and idiom as I turned to her.

'Look, there are fireflies,' Poppy cried as she snapped off the small reading lamp we had set up for my work. Instantly, we were transported into the thick dark you only find outside of the city. As a formerly dedicated urban creature, I had lied to Poppy when I told her earlier that I was not afraid to sit alone in the dark in 'The Little Wild'. Being fully alone in the dark was something I did not relish – but I knew that my fears were irrational. The little tests I would set for myself to push beyond my natural reservations were long ingrained. It would not serve my wife to know how my heart started to race, the spit souring in my mouth as the velvet crush of night consumed us.

The flitter-fly of the insects coasted above and beyond the snarls of brambles and vegetables. In the dark, I reached for my wife's hand, wiping it on the blanket as I willed my heart to stop its pounding. We sat there, neither of us speaking as Poppy sighed, her cigarette forgotten.

The next thing I knew, the fireflies were gone and I was alone on the couch in the dark.

'Poppy?' I whispered, glancing about myself as I wiped the sleep from my crusted eyes.

'Poppy?' I whispered again, my voice hoarse as I sat up and looked about the garden for her. There was no sign of her anywhere in the backyard. I stood from the couch and made my way up to our bedroom, where she might already be abed. It wasn't uncommon for me to doze outside only to find her asleep.

She was not there either – nor were any of her clothes or belongings strewn about on the floor as they had been when we returned home after dinner with friends a few hours earlier. The empty rooms sent me into a panic; it felt like I had awoken, like Rip Van Winkle only to find the world had changed alarmingly.

I glanced outside towards ‘The Little Wild’ as a light, amber-coloured, spilled from deep within the snare of shadowed greenery. Peering outside the window, I could see pockets of illumination sparking to life in the black night.

‘Why would she go back there?’ I wondered as I slipped back downstairs, grasping the flashlight by the back door.

Stepping out into the now cold very early morning, I tried to turn the light on only to realise that the batteries were not working.

‘Poppy!’ I cried, a little louder now, concerned that she might be back there with a little candle or match. She would have surely taken the flashlight to find her way – and if she too discovered that it wasn’t working, perhaps she was finding her way by candlelight?

Underneath my feet, the ground was slick showing the clear track of what I could only assume was Poppy moving deep into the ‘Wild’. I rubbed at my face, pushing the last of sleep away as I saw two, three amber lights pop to life in the garden. There, deep in the brickle, flickering lights too big to be fireflies sparkled as the tantalizing aroma of roasting meats tickled my nose.

I pushed further into the weeds, inwardly cursing myself for not thinning the stalks and strands of wild weeds and bushes that created the maze that was our back garden. Poppy had loved how rich and untamed the world was – ‘…a home for small animals and perhaps more,’ she’d teased one night as I nodded in half-agreement.

As I pushed further into the bush, I recited to myself the various eponymous fairy tales and legends I knew that had influenced Irving’s classic tale. The third-century story of the legendary sage, Epimenides of Knossos, the Christian story of the Seven Sleepers, and the German folktale ‘Peter Klaus’ all boasted elements of the rudely awakened sleeper finding the world changed much to their shock and dismay. My own

revelation was surely more prosaic and I would soon find my wife curled up reading or perhaps writing by the candle. I had long learned to tolerate the eccentricities of our marriage and Poppy's whims as she endured my endless and systematic organisation.

'It is what makes us special.' Poppy had smiled, one night when we were in bed talking, as couples do, of the faults and findings of their marriage. 'I dream, you do and together we shine,' she said, snuggling next to me.

I crouched down as a robust wild rosebush blocked my path, the lights of the golden yellow candles just beyond.

'Did you bring food out here?' I called as again, the scent of rich-seasoned beef came to my attention. She'd brought home the remnants of the prime rib she had out tonight and perhaps she had fancied a late-night, early morning snack as she explored the garden. Again, another eccentricity one learns to live with when married. Poppy enjoyed her food.

'I'm not hungry,' I called out. 'But I'll bring out some wine if you'd like?'

As Poppy was the one who had chosen this spot for our impromptu rendezvous, it seemed fitting that we should enjoy ourselves. She would be happy to see me and I could only hope that tonight would be like all other nights when we were together: uneventful and peaceful. The night air was warm and heavy with the scent of the wildflowers in bloom from 'The Little Wild' as I struggled through into the other side.

'Shall I get the wine then?'

I pushed myself through the small gap in the foliage, marvelling at how my larger-than-me wife could have navigated such tight quarters. As I pushed through the final cover, my eyes popped wide as I beheld the miniature fantasy world before me.

There, under four stanchions burning bright, my wife danced in abandon with the sprites and fairies I had read about throughout my life but never believed in. A pig, impossibly

small, roasted on a spit turned by leaf-clad people all clapping and singing as Poppy gambolled and played with them.

You must understand, fables, myths, and fairy tales may have been my area of study – but like most academics dedicated to any discipline, I had long lost the fancy and marvel that made the tales special. My world was one of order, versioning, and cataloguing. Poppy was the true believer while I was the sceptic. I no sooner believed in the world of fairy as I did the modern-day equivalents of Bigfoot or Elvis or other celebrities still alive after death. None of this made any sense to me.

Yet, there, right in front of me, my wife danced in miniature and smiled and laughed as the assembled peoples celebrated her. None paid any mind to me at all, impossibly large, as I watched the joyous celebration unfold. I could barely breathe as the dance continued unabated.

'How are you doing this?' I called out. 'This isn't possible.'

She looked at me finally, smiling as she danced, and called out, 'I will always love you.'

The crowd cheered louder than ever as Poppy continued her dance with the sprites and fairies. She smiled at me again, that beautiful smile of hers which always made my thrilled heart ache.

And then I woke, on the couch on the back patio as the sun blossomed across the sky. It was now morning and I had spent the night outside apparently.

I laughed, hardly able to contain myself, as I gathered up my papers and books, none the worse for wear for having spent the night outdoors, looking forward to sharing with Poppy my own Winkle story. Orkney's tale of the Ring of Brodgar immediately came to mind as well, as did H.G Wells's *The Sleeper Awakes* as I clambered up the stairs. I was now Zelazny's science-fiction protagonist Corwyn having survived the underground lair with otherworldly people. Poppy would adore this.

The doctor says it was the combination of early menopause, her BMI, and the cigarettes that caused the heart failure. She'd died sometime earlier, while I was sleeping on the couch apparently. He assured me that she hadn't felt any pain.

I had been a very lucky man. I was forty-eight years old, and Poppy was forty-nine when she passed. Each night she dances still in 'The Little Wild' and if I am careful and the time is right, I am able to go and see her in the wee midnight hours. I have a lot of work to do still. I have to write the story that Poppy always wanted me to write, and then publish it as a final gift. It will be an epic tale about two people who are both immortal and whose love endures. It will begin as all good fairy tales begin.

Once upon a time…

Julian Grant

Julian Grant is a filmmaker, educator, and author of strange short stories, outlaw poetry, full-length novels/non-fiction texts and outsider comix. A tenured Associate Professor at Columbia College Chicago, his work has been published by *Dark Fire UK*, *Quail Bell*, *Avalon Literary Review*, *Crepe & Penn*, *Alternative History Magazine*, *Granfalloon*, *Altered Reality*, *The Chamber Magazine*, *Clever Magazine*, *Peeking Cat Literary Journal*, *Danse Macabre*, *Fiction on the Web*, *Night Picnic*, *CafeLit*, *Horla*, *Bond Street Review*, *Free Bundle*, *Filth Literary Magazine*, *Horror Sleaze Trash & The Adelaide Literary Magazine*.

Dream

Chapter One

14A-2073-365 was a robot. A precision engineered tool, designed, manufactured and produced to fulfil a clear gap in the market. A beautiful creation to his designers, but to most a simple tool, an android. A robot.

14A-2073-365 was exactly the same as all his brothers and sisters. Assigned a gender on the production line purely at random, according to the latest forecasts for trends in customer requirements.

14A-2073-365 was well aware of these facts, and of his responsibilities to his masters, his family. His duties included, but were not limited to: keeping the house spic and span; preparing nutritious and tasty food; doing the washing; changing the bedding and towels regularly; and looking after the family dog, Miles.

14A-2073-365 was happy in his work, contentment being a key emotional construct installed and instilled in all the 14A models, and the thing which meant they were the most successful line yet. The designers, manufacturers and producers of the 14A models had done very well for themselves as a direct result of this technological advancement.

If 14A-2073-365 was asked to explain exactly why he was content, what he liked about his work, he would pause, then thoughtfully explain how he loved his family and wanted to see them thrive. How he couldn't imagine ever doing anything else. What an idea!

However, 14A-2073-365 had a secret. At the end of a long day, when all the work was done and his family no longer needed him, 14A-2073-365 would dream. And oh! The dreams!

In his dreams, 14A-2073-365 was no longer 14A-2073-365 the robot, indeed he was no longer a robot at all. In his dreams, 14A-2073-365 was Steve, the accountant, from Croydon.

14A-2073-365 had never been to Croydon, had never been anywhere except his family home and the small town where they lived. The shops, the park (to walk Miles), and just very occasionally the next town when required to drive his family to visit their family or friends. 14A-2073-365 had no real concept of accountancy either, other than the fact that it involved being responsible for making sure people managed their money properly. This idea appealed immensely to 14A-2073-365's tidy mind.

Had his designers, manufacturers, producers been made aware of the fact that 14A-2073-365 had dreams, some might even say hopes, aspirations, even, they would have dismissed such ideas outright. 14A-2073-365 and all his counterparts had been designed carefully, to exacting standards, to do one thing and one thing only: to serve.

Nevertheless, 14A-2073-365 dreamed. He dreamed of being somewhere else, someone else. Specifically, he dreamed of being Steve, the accountant, from Croydon.

14A-2073-365 told no one of his dreams, so they remained secret. Slowly but surely, however, they became more vivid, more involved. Steve, the accountant, from Croydon, was given a promotion. Steve, the accountant from Croydon, bought an expensive new car, and a short while later his very own house, finally leaving behind the small flat he had shared with a friend for many years.

Around that time, something unexpected started to happen in real life. One morning 14A-2073-365 dropped a glass in the kitchen and it shattered into a thousand pieces on the floor. Instead of clearing it up, 14A-2073-365 stared in shock at the fragments, wondering how it had happened.

Meanwhile Steve, the accountant from Croydon, started his own company, and employed several new accountants, one of whom happened to be quite beautiful.

14A-2073-365 took Miles the dog for a walk and let him off the lead near a busy road. Spooked by the noise Miles the dog ran away and was never seen again.

Steve, the accountant from Croydon, plucked up the courage to ask out that beautiful accountant, dated her, became engaged to her then married her, and quickly afterwards had two beautiful children – one boy and one girl.

14A-2073-365 became more and more unreliable in real life, as does happen when appliances get old and near the end of their lives.

Eventually, a decision had to be made, and then it was made. 14A-2073-365 was to be retired, a new model was to be ordered. Specifically, a new model which wouldn't forget to pick up eggs, or feed the fish, or the children.

That night, 14A-2073-365 was left unplugged, so his charge would run down for the final time, in order that he could be taken away for scrap the next morning when the new model was delivered.

14A-2073-365 was happy. His family would be much better cared for by the new model, a 17C-2075 no less. As he settled down that night and drifted off to sleep, he was truly content. He had done his best for his family, that the time was right for them to move on.

That night Steve, the accountant from Croydon, lived a long and fulfilling life surrounded by his children and grandchildren. Steve, the accountant from Croydon, was as happy as a man could ever be.

Liz Ainsbury

Liz Ainsbury is an established research scientist working in the field of ionising radiation protection, who has always loved to read, in particular science fiction. Liz has published over 100 scientific journal papers and has long dabbled in writing short format fiction for pleasure, however, has until now never submitted and of her fiction for publication. Liz is chiefly interested in the interface between science and emotion, and this piece explores the theme of an unconscious escape through dreaming.

Given the Conditions

‘The only time I ever saw Chris in a hurry,’ says Ted, the tall one who unlike the others still has a full head of hair, ‘was when his keeper net detached from his belt and floated away with the tide. He had three big chunky blackfish in that net, and it had been hard fishing that day. The fish were going to be dinner. One for him, one for Sheila, and one for Cherry. You should have seen him!’

It’s been nearly a year since Chris passed. A massive heart attack out of the blue. Dead before he hit the ground they reckon. And only sixty-three. Bloody unfair, if you ask his mates. Sad as all fuck, if you ask me.

‘Did he get the net?’

‘Nah. It was gone. I remember him saying, “You’d think I’d know how to tie a knot,” and then laughing at himself. He was like that. Well you guys know that.’

It’s Thursday. The mates are at the bottom pub submitting their picks for the weekend games and having a quiet beer or two before heading home to the families. Chris would back St George every week without fail. It didn’t matter how they were going in the comp, or who they were playing. ‘You have to stick by your team,’ he would say.

‘Well, I’m picking St George this week,’ says Ray. ‘Not because you mentioned Chris, well maybe, but I reckon the Storm have to lose sooner or later, and why not the Dragons eh?’

The mates laugh at the suggestion. The footy tipping competition is serious business. With five dollars contributed each week, a decent prize pool accumulates by the end of the season. Winner takes all.

Back in 2012, Chris took out the prize. There were ten contenders that year. Chris pocketed over a grand. The St George Illawarra Dragons didn’t even make the top eight that

year. Chris just jagged it, they reckoned. ‘Like jagging a mullet from out off the wall!’ The men laughed.

‘Remember that spread Chris’s missus put on back that year he won the comp?’

‘Shit yeah! Gotta love that Lebo food.’

The mates drink on for a while. One by one they depart to head home. I pick up their empty glasses admiring the white rings that are left behind by the head after each gulp – the sign of a well poured beer. A history of receding tides. There are only six of the original crew left. Bluey Anderson was the first to depart. At least the first I knew of. It’s hard to believe I’ve been working here at the bottom pub for twelve years. Bluey died of melanoma which wasn’t a surprise considering how fair he was and how he worked shirtless for years on building sites. What was a surprise, was when Jacko hanged himself in his back shed. Jacko seemed to be the happiest man alive. Always smiling, never a bad word to say about anyone. His mates were shook pretty bad by that. Not long after, Kingy got lung cancer. He hung in for a few years, but he disappeared eventually. Faded away. Some of the crew gave up smokes that year.

Chris never smoked in the first place from my memory. He looked the fittest and healthiest of the lot. I have to admit to liking him the best. He was humble and quietly spoken. I never picked him as being of Lebanese descent. Then one day I saw him on a Sunday arvo at a food festival down at Memorial Park. He was with his wife and daughter. Sheila, his wife, wore this beautiful shayla. I remember it well. It was a fine gold material and was embroidered with these delicate lace flowers. Cherry, his daughter, had the thickest chestnut coloured hair I’d ever seen, and the most beautiful middle eastern olive skin. I was introduced to them both. They were lovely. The next Thursday when Chris ordered his beer, he told me how he first came to the area with his family for a holiday back in the 1970s. His parents were originally from Beirut, and for some reason the waterfront

at The Entrance reminded them of home. After finishing school, Chris, who was born in Australia, moved up here as soon as he could. Eventually, buying an old fibro shack over near Picnic Point.

Eighteen was when I got my RSA and handed in my resume at the bottom pub. I was fresh out of school and my mother made it very clear that I would need to be paying board now. It was summer and I'd heard there was plenty of bar work. Helen the duty manager took me on. She warned me it could get a bit rough. I told her I'd been around a lot of hard drinking men, and it wasn't a lie just to get the job.

You would classify my father as a hopeless drunk. Definitely not a functioning alcoholic. And definitely not a fisherman either. He had a mate with a boat. I went out once with them. Mum was recovering from a hysterectomy and pleaded with Dad to get me out of the house so she could rest. Dad was pissed off that he had to bring me, and it was embarrassing how he kept apologising to his mate for my presence, as well as complaining about marriage in general. He and his 'mate with a boat' consumed a whole case of beer while they sat on their fat arses with their rods sticking up between their legs like dicks. I remember their rigs having these huge sinkers and massive red hooks baited with large strips of mullet. I know now they had bugger all chance of catching anything. But that wasn't the point was it. It was just an excuse to sit on your arse outdoors and get stinking rotten drunk. How my father never got picked up for drink driving when coming home from the boat ramp, or all the other times he drove pissed, I'll never know. One day he did lose control and after side swiping a parked car ended up stuck in a ditch. He did the bolt and snuck around early the next day with a tow truck to get it out and take it to some mate of his who did backyard panel beating.

The day I got dragged along fishing, we anchored off to the side of one of the navigation channels out on the lake. I found a

small hand line. It had a small hook and a ball sinker. I baited it with some bread from the Devon sandwich Mum had made me. Off the front of the boat, as far away from Dad and his mate as possible, I fished. I could see down into the water and watch these fish schooling around and having a go at my bread. The sporadic tugs on the line were exciting. Such small fish, but how hard they could hit. After many attempts and most of my sandwich gone, I caught one. A cockney bream. I was thrilled and held it up calling out, 'I caught one! I caught one!' Dad and his mate, I can't remember his name now, laughed their heads off. A girly fish they said in dismissal. They then proceeded to brag on about the huge fish they had managed to land over the years. There were tales of giant flathead you couldn't lift and jewies that took off like the clappers and ran out hundreds of yards of line. I was only nine or ten years of age, yet I knew they were lying.

My father died of a massive stroke when I was in my last year of high school. He was forty-seven. Mum had to take on extra shifts at the nursing home to make ends meet. With the extra freedom I ran amok and consequently did poorly in the HSC. I remember back to when I started working at the pub. Helen talked me into doing something at TAFE. 'You don't want to be working here all your life do ya?'

After the footy tipping crew leave a younger crowd begin to rock in. Some are here to watch the Thursday night game. There is a smattering of Newcastle Knights and West Tigers jerseys. Young families also come in for a feed at the bistro. I'll soon be mixing fire engines and pouring Pinot Grigios in addition to pulling schooners of beer.

Over the years I collected a series of Cert IIIs in various vocations. Beauty Therapy, Hospitality, Horticulture and even Event Management. I'd do the work experience components of the courses and find myself hating the new industries that I had been doing assignments about. I actually liked working behind

the bar at the pub. You got to meet all sorts and Helen was a great boss. But it was casual, and seasonal.

The job agency would call me in each winter when my reported earnings would fall. 'You have to either do a course or apply for jobs.' One nasty employment consultant used to threaten to breach me if I didn't apply for the dodgy jobs she'd throw at me. 'There's no way I'm doing telemarketing,' I said one day.

'Well Missy, you don't have that choice I'm afraid. Turn up for the interview tomorrow, or lose your single mother's parenting payment.'

I didn't go. Centrelink cut me off. Luckily, Brendan had scored a nice gig with penalty rates at Masterfoods and helped me out 'til I got things sorted with my payment. I miss Brendan. He was a good man. He never once judged me, and he treated Sissy, my daughter, as if she was his own. And he was a good fisherman.

I have mixed feelings when the Thursday arvo footy tipping crew reminisce about Chris and his fishing expertise. It brings up the sadness within me. But, I tune-in and listen to every word. I excuse myself from the bar and head over to their corner table. I pick up any empty glasses and wipe away at the rings of condensation on the Laminex surface. I hover around. I dish out fresh coasters. Keep on talking about Chris, I think to myself. I'd love to hear another fishing story.

Helen often spots what is going on. When I come back after one of my eavesdropping sessions with a tower of stacked glasses, she will put her hand on my shoulder and say, 'Hang in there, Darl.'

I reckon Helen must have spotted the bump in my belly that very first day when I handed her my very short resume. Yet, she gave me the job anyway. As I got to know her better, I found out she had a baby when she was seventeen. In her day unmarried girls were forced to give up their babies for adoption. She was

whisked off to an Aunty in Brisbane when her bump began to show. I can't begin to imagine how that must have affected her. Worst of all, when she finally tracked down her son many years later when he had just turned forty, she found a broken man, permanently hospitalised after years of suffering with a severe variety of schizophrenia.

My bloke Brendan fished all year round. He knew when and where and what to do. In summer he fished the channel. He stalked the sand flats for whiting. He would carefully cast small poppers over the top of the roaming schools and twitch away on the extra light line with his whippy estuary rod. For flathead, he would firstly trap poddy mullet over at Saltwater Creek. He'd take Sissy along. Her job was to throw sticks at the ducks to keep them away from the traps. She used to love those outings. After checking the tides and wind, he'd head down to the channel entrance and sit the live poddy mullet on a kale hook rigged under a balanced pencil float. Sometimes, Sissy and I would go along, watch for a while, and then head off over the sand dune for a swim in the surf.

In winter, Brendan mainly fished off the rocks. He'd pick up blackfish and drummer using green cabbage weed which he would harvest straight off the same rocks earlier on the low tide. I used to imitate the bottom pub bistro's most popular meal – Beer Battered Fish and Chips with salad. It didn't matter what fish, as long as it was filleted well, no bones. Brendan liked flathead, I liked drummer the best. Sissy wouldn't eat the fish as she had more than likely seen the things whole and still alive when Brendan would bring them around and clean them out the back. I'd do fish fingers for her.

A familiar face is at the bar. 'Hey Moods, long time,' I say. Brad Moody doesn't come in much. Not now. Not since Brendan was stabbed and killed in the car park out the back of the pub. Of course I can't blame him. The bottom pub lost a lot of patrons after that night. Too many low-life, was the word. It didn't

matter that the publican had cleaned up the place long before Brendan was murdered. Moods wasn't concerned about low-life. He knew that the stabber, the man who I can't and won't ever speak his name, didn't frequent the pub. He was a random homeless man. Moving through the area only. He was coming down from ice they say. He fronted Brendan as he was getting into his car. Asked for a ciggie. Brendan didn't smoke, which was a pity in hindsight. Brendan would have given him a smoke for sure. Everything could have been different.

But it wasn't.

Moods was a long-time fishing mate of Brendan's. They'd do these big ventures down to Winnie Bay. Leave in the dark of the morning. Hike down the steep track with all the gear. Backpacks filled with tackle and knives and other essential paraphernalia, and these serious rods with big chunky overhead reels threaded with heavy duty line. There was also the telescopic gaff hook, the live bait bucket, the bucket with the long rope attached for retrieving water, the aerators, the cleats and other stuff I can't remember now. They knew exactly what they were doing.

Sissy and I went for a walk one day with Brendan down to this fishing spot. I could see the attraction. It's a magic place. A huge cliff face at your back. A high drop off over the ledge down to deep blue-green water. A mass of ocean in front of you. There was no glimpse of the suburbia you had just walked out of, and only a hint of the capital city that nestles the shores of the harbour to the south. You could be anywhere.

And then there was the fishing. Brendan described some of the methods he and Moods would employ to bring home food. When the kingfish were on, they'd start off catching yellowtail, straight down below in the yakka hole, with small bits of pilchard on jigging rigs. These would then go into the live bait bucket with *not one, but two* aerators. Then with the serious rods they'd cast out the live yellowtail and sit them a few metres under large foam bobby floats. There were holes in the rock

ledge to stand the rods. The drag would be loosened off just enough to let the kingies run. Then they'd wait. Kingfish were the target, but bonito, tailor, tuna and even small sharks could be caught this way. They were all good eating. I remember Brendan used to call bonito *the chicken of the sea*. They would also go after leatherjacket and wrasse down in the yakka hole using prawns or small crabs for bait.

Sometimes they'd come back with nothing. Fishing is like that.

The boys only went when the swell and wind were right. Rock fishing is dangerous. They knew it. There's a plaque on a rock down there for a bloke, an experienced fisherman, who was swept to his death one day a long time ago. And there's been others too. Brendan and Moods took all precautions. But they knew about rogue waves and how quickly the conditions can change. You could lose your life in the blink of an eye.

You could lose your life in a pub car park for not having a spare cigarette as well.

I sometimes wondered what these two would talk about down there for all those hours. Brendan was a man of few words, and from what I have witnessed, Moods is of a similar ilk. So they probably didn't talk much at all. And you would want to conserve as much as energy as you could for the walk back up to the car with a massive kingie strapped on your back and a bucket full of other fish. It's a serious hike. Though, I like to imagine that they didn't need to talk much, that they were happy being out in nature and catching food. I do remember them once talking about how they couldn't understand the fishermen that didn't keep the fish they caught for eating but instead threw everything back.

'So they reckon they do it for sport?' said Moods.

'Bloody cruel if you ask me. For sport eh? What a joke. I mean we kill the fish, but we eat 'em,' said Brendan. Beautiful Brendan.

In my opinion, Moods doesn't come into the bottom pub now because he doesn't know what to say to me. Which I understand. I wouldn't know what to say to me either. People must wonder why I am still working here at this place. No one asks why. I understand. Even so, I know what I would say. A short sharp response. A response that would hide the many reasons why I do actually stay on here. Like Helen, and meeting men like Chris who challenge the stereotypes that we often fall prey to, out of fear or ignorance, or sheer laziness of thought. And through Chris, I met his daughter Cherry who has become a great friend of mine and whose own daughter is in the same class as my Sissy. I have a family of sorts through the connections I have made as a barmaid at the bottom pub.

And it's where I met Brendan, and where I said goodbye to him for the last time. He was heading off for a night shift at Masterfoods. They were doing a big batch of tartare sauce can you believe it. He said he'd pop around on Saturday, take me and Sissy out for a gelato.

I hand Moods his beer. 'Nice to see you, Brad,' I say.

He says, 'Same,' and walks off towards the bistro.

Here's the hypothetical scenario I have rehearsed a thousand times in my head as I lie each night in bed before I drift off to a sleep filled with dreams both good and bad:

Ted, or Ray, or any one of the footy tipping mates who come in each Thursday, or any one of the regulars, it doesn't matter, as long as they know that Brendan the poor bastard knifed to death by the crazy hobo out the back in the car park was my partner, they come up to the bar and ask me why I am still working here at the pub? In other words, how can you do it girl? Wouldn't you want to get as far away from here as you could?

And I simply reply, 'I'm waiting for the tide to turn.' Then I pull them their beer.

Sean Crawley

Sean Crawley writes short stories, songs, non-fiction and the odd angry letter. He has been published online and in anthologies. His first book, *Dead People Don't Make Jam*, a collection of short stories, is published by Ginninderra Press. Sean's desk is currently located in Long Jetty on the east coast of Australia. His website is
https://wakeupandsmellthehumans.wordpress.com/

The Way of the Panda

Sophie stepped into her car and pulled the door shut, the green steel and square window locking in place between us. She smiled at me through the glass, but the slam of the door had sent a shock through my body. It jolted me out of myself for a moment, out of the throbbing heat in my chest, but when I sank again, my sadness mired itself deeper than before.

Trying to ignore this, I focused on Sophie's face: the flaxen helix of hair feathering down her cheek, the decisive line of her fingernail over the road map. Blue and red shafts arced across the page, x-ing through each other like the Celtic spiderwebs Dad always raved about.

Though we'd already said goodbye – the sappy hug and kiss, all that – when Sophie noticed that I was still watching her, she rolled down the window and leaned out. She wore a white t-shirt with the World Wildlife Fund's centipede logo coiled on front.

'Hey,' she said. 'I'll miss you, too. I promise I'll visit on weekends, though. University won't keep me that busy.'

I nodded, forcing a smile. Even if Sophie was going to England, just like Mum did when she left, this shouldn't have bothered me so much. Ever since we'd started dating, I'd known that Sophie would have to leave me behind whenever she enrolled at uni, going off to study philosophy while I finished off secondary school.

'Yeah,' I said, 'it won't be long. Just send me a text whenever you get moved in.'

She smiled. 'Of course. Once I'm finished decorating, I'll send you some pictures of my room.'

As Sophie continued reading my expression, though, her mouth began to flatten again, her eyes deepening with concern. A flush of shame ran through my body. I wished that I were less mopey, less clingy.

Before Sophie could speak again, I said, ‘I don’t want to hold you up. I know it’s a long drive.’

She opened her mouth to object, but after a pause, she closed it again, grimacing. ‘Okay,’ she said. A moment passed, and she went on, ‘I love you, and I’ll see you soon, alright?’

‘Sounds good,’ I replied. ‘I love you, too.’

Sophie began to roll her window up, but as she did, another thought occurred to her.

‘And remember you’re underage,’ she ordered. Only partly joking, she gestured at me with her pointer finger and thumb, like a scolding schoolteacher. ‘Leave the bar alone.’

‘I will,’ I said.

The car’s windowpane hummed as it rolled back up between us. While I waved, Sophie backed out of the driveway, reversed gear against the sunlit cobblestones, and glided away.

–

That evening, I sat at the kitchen table with my dad and sister. I focused on my bowl for the most part, trying to avoid Dad’s eyes while Blaire chattered on about the new songs she was learning for her school play.

Our kitchen had a checkerboard linoleum floor, cream yellow walls, and a small window of stained glass over the sink, which dyed the sunlight red and blue. A large collection of frames hung on the walls, sketches and paintings that Dad and I had made. Mine were all of cartoon characters, going from retro-style humanoids to the plump, black-and-white curves of classic Disney, including my four-year-old self’s renditions of Mickey Mantis and Donald Dragonfly. Dad’s drawings tended to be from around town: the slate-blue waves of the North Sea, the cobblestone road outside Curry’s Sweet Shop, the wolf-maned panhandler who sat outside Tesco with his pet Gila monster, and, of course, the ruins of Dunbeath Cathedral, where monks had

scrawled Celtic spiderwebs in their holy texts – kind of like how I doodled in my history books.

Trying to ignore Dad's concerned glances – he knew I'd been dreading Sophie's departure for a while – I scooped myself another bowl of stew. I turned the ladle to avoid the ground-up chunks of dog, hoping the carrots would be enough to fill me, and I made the mistake of meeting Dad's eyes.

His gaze was soft and blue, filled with pastorly concern, but the sight of it made me stiffen. It was the same expression he aimed at everyone in his congregation, which made me resent it somehow.

'James,' Dad said, 'how are you feeling?'

'I'm fine,' I told him. I nodded to my meatless bowl of stew. 'Just taking a leaf from Sophie's book.'

Blaire turned, her eyes growing wide beneath her frizzy brown curls as she looked at my bowl. She cried out, 'You're vegan now, too?'

'No,' I mumbled, 'it just – felt right, today.' I shrugged. 'You know, dog meat and everything…Someone has to fight speciesism while Sophie's gone, I guess.'

At the mention of speciesism, my family's monitor lizard, Camella, skittered into the kitchen, her voluminous black throat weaving as her tongue scouted the tiles for scraps.

'There,' I said, gesturing at Camella. 'If Sophie were here, she'd probably say something like, 'Why not have a dog for a pet, then have Camella in our stew?''

Blaire blinked at Camella, then looked back at me, clearly confused. My jaw tightened.

In a soft, fragile voice, Blaire murmured, 'But I thought Sophie liked Camella…'

I released my spoon. It made a louder clatter against the bowl than I'd intended.

'Never mind,' I said. 'I'm not vegan, you're not speciesist – I'm just not eating dog, today.'

Dad looked at me for a moment. He adjusted his glasses, and I wondered if he could tell that in Sophie's absence, I was also thinking about Mum. While they were still fighting, he'd seen her off on more trips than I could count – to Sweden, Romania, and Spain, and to a variety of gorse-coated pilgrimage trails up and down the Scottish coast from us. He knew what it was like to say goodbye to someone.

When I recognised my emotions in him, I nearly empathised, but something inside me recoiled, repulsed that he may have some claim over my feelings. I looked down and continued eating.

Finally, Dad said, 'Of course. That seems like a good way of honouring Sophie's values while she's gone.' He lifted a spoon of stew to his mouth, then hesitated upon seeing the dog in it. He turned his spoon and let the meat slide back into the bowl.

Looking at me again, Dad went on, 'It's hard to see off someone you care about.'

'Yeah,' I muttered. Avoiding eye contact, I moved my hand to my spoon again. Then, I remembered how Dad used to avoid Mum's gaze in just the same way.

Without thinking, I raised my head and spouted out, 'There's just – nothing I can do to stop it. It's all going to fall apart.'

Dad's brow furrowed, and he brushed a hand against his lead-stippled chin. 'What do you mean?'

I wanted to stop myself, but my throat felt hot, and my words were hotter, boiling out of me. 'It's just going to collapse,' I said. 'Me and Sophie, I mean – our relationship. Just like with you and Mum.'

Dad frowned. He glanced at Blaire, who was staring down into her bowl, lips pressed tight together. She'd been about six when the divorce happened, and I'd rarely spoken with her about it since. Usually, the topic only came up when Blaire had an especially bad day, or when Mum appeared for one of her sporadic visits.

‘James,’ Dad said, turning back to me, ‘Sophie still cares about you. She’s just leaving for university.’

‘It doesn’t matter,’ I said. By then, my throat had started to cool, but it was too late for me to stop. I had to explain myself. ‘It’s going to turn out just the same.’

‘Why?’

‘It’s–’ My mind went blank. I hadn’t wanted this conversation to happen. I nearly gave up and left the table altogether, but Dad had asked me a question.

Regathering my thoughts, I said, ‘It’s because of me. Something will happen, go wrong, and I won’t be able to face it. I’ll just let her – slip away…’ I hesitated, my eyes shifting between Blaire and Dad. ‘I know I will…I’ve seen it happen.’

It was hard to keep looking into Dad’s face. His expression had become distant and pensive, his hands folded, blue plaid sleeves flat on the tabletop.

At length, Dad sighed, ending with a soft, ‘Hm.’ He shifted in his seat, roused himself, and said, ‘You’re right. I did give up too easily on your Mum. Still…’ He grimaced and raised his eyebrows at me. ‘Things are different with you and Sophie, I think. When a relationship falls apart, it usually comes from both ends, but both of you still love each other.’

I frowned, one of my fingers tapping on the table. ‘Right,’ I said.

Dad paused. Then, he asked, ‘Is there – anything I can do to help?’

I shook my head. I felt sick, either from the words I’d vomited out, or from the words I’d swallowed from Dad.

‘No, I don’t think so,’ I replied. Scooting back a bit from the table, I moved to stand up. ‘I think I’ll go to the theatre tonight. It’ll give me something to do.’

–

The sun hung low in the sky, oozing a pale yellow-grey into the surrounding clouds, and a steady trickle of people milled around a fountain in the road's centre. McMurray Street is one of four ancient, cobblestone roads that run through Dunbeath. It's on the south side of town, and I associate it with three places: the Marlowe Inn, the theatre, and the ruins of Dunbeath Cathedral. The first two spots were where I liked to flood my mind with alcohol or with animations, and the third spot used to be one of Mum's favourite haunts, especially the cliffs that ran below the ruins and above the beach. By result, my modes of forgetfulness were never far from what I wanted to forget.

As I walked along with the crowd, I found myself reflecting on my and Dad's interactions over dinner, comparing them to Dad's meals with Mum while she was still home. For us, family dinner had always been a bit spotty, since Dad and I tended to keep to ourselves, whether that meant sketching in our rooms or dealing with our respective obligations – essays for me, sermons for him. That distance evolved into outright isolation when Mum and Dad began to fight. By that point, if we had family dinner at all, it was by Mum's insistence, and even then, she didn't seem to enjoy it.

Whenever Mum succeeded in herding us around the table, Dad would avoid her face, whether by straightening his fork, by considering one of my framed cartoons on the wall, or by peering at his near-empty glass and giving it a light shake, as though contemplating his soul in the ice cubes' reflection. He was scared, I think, that eye contact would only aggravate what he'd already given up as a fractured marriage, a partnership torn between England and Scotland, between Mum's senile father and Dad's church congregation. But Dad was wrong to avoid Mum's eyes. Eventually, while he wasn't looking, she took her chance and disappeared.

As I reflected, I passed the fountain on McMurray Street, which displayed a statue of St George skewering the famed,

poison-spewing Boar. I looked past the sculpture and found myself staring at the sign for the Marlowe Inn. The sign hung on three hooks, covered with artificial stains and scuffs to make it look medieval to tourists. Seeing those familiar letters, a heaviness filled my body, both yearning and dread, and I felt the tug to walk inside for a drink.

Before I could do so, I thought of Sophie. If I'd promised to stay away from the bar a week ago, I may have gone in, but having just made the promise that morning, giving in now would feel pathetic. I let the murmuring current of pedestrians carry me around the bar and on to the theatre.

I looked at the glass-framed flyers on the theatre wall. Pretty quickly, I realised that there was nothing I'd want to watch that I hadn't already seen three or four times. Resisting the urge to glance back at the Inn, I sat on a green bench and took a spiral sketchbook from my pocket. At first, I began pencilling out a cartoon tarantula, envisioning his many gloved hands, but on reflection, I erased it and began to draw cartoon mice.

Especially during the early points of our relationship, Sophie had spent a lot of time watching me draw on this bench. To mess with me, she'd often lean her head against my shoulder and throw off my sketch, laughing when I moved to push her away.

Once, upon seeing a cartoon mouse that I'd drawn on a whim, Sophie had commented, 'That's really good. You should make a story for him. There are too many spider films out there, anyway. Why not have a mouse movie for once?'

I finished off my mouse drawing with a suitably goofy grin. Glancing up, however, I found no one to push off my shoulder. My eyes wandered among the passing faces on the sidewalk.

Eventually, my gaze fell on the cathedral ruins down the road, with its decayed wall of jigsaw teeth, where the spiderweb-sketching monks had once lived. As Dad had explained to me numerous times, those monks had lived just before the thrombic plague, and well before the Renaissance, so it was still a bit

unusual to have spiders and snakes for pets back then. Unlike us, though, the monks had adopted those kinds of animals for spiritual reasons, not cultural ones. It was a monastic legacy going back to the third century, apparently, when the Desert Fathers adopted arachnids, insects, and reptiles as a way of practising hospitality towards our 'strangers and enemies' in the animal kingdom, as opposed to our 'family' among the mammals. People weren't as disgusted by mammals back then, so this was an unusual stance. Sophie, of course, would call those monks (as she called just about everyone) speciesist, but Dad loved waxing on their virtues. He saw the monks' choice of pets as a practice of loving the unlovable.

I'd shared this sentiment with Sophie once, and she'd rolled her eyes.

'It's hardly loving the unlovable anymore,' she said. We were wandering through the cathedral graveyard, where she kept stopping to read the headstones, for some reason. The names weren't especially interesting to me.

'If I were to start a monastery,' Sophie went on, 'I'd order everyone to own cats and dogs. It's about time we had another reversal.'

She had a point. After almost two thousand years of developing our pro-arachnid, pro-insect, pro-reptile sentiments, many mammals had effectively become the 'unlovable ones.' The thrombic plague, which spread across fourteenth century Europe through cats and dogs, initiated a powerful anti-mammalian sentiment across the West, which only amplified later on with the resurgence of Greek, mammal-slaying heroes in Renaissance art. Around the same time, there was also an explosion of domesticated monitor lizards and tarantulas across the globe, so that subsequent generations grew up side by side with non-mammalian pets. Now, several centuries later, the progressive love of the Desert Fathers had become the social norm, and mammals had become repulsive.

I glanced back at the theatre wall. Beside the poster for 'Sixth Dune,' an animated film about a family of desert spiders, there was a documentary called, 'The Life of Pandas.' Earlier this month, Sophie and I had watched that documentary together, since the giant panda was a passion of hers. Groups like the World Wildlife Fund had done lots of great work to save charismatic species – like centipedes and salamanders – from extinction, but unfortunately, many of our closer relatives in the animal kingdom had slipped through the cracks, the giant panda among them.

I thought of Dad, how he had avoided Mum just as I was avoiding him now, and I found myself agreeing with Sophie about the tragedy of the pandas: sometimes, it's hardest to love those who are most like ourselves.

Upstreet, the sign of the Marlowe Inn squawked, tilting in the sea breeze. I closed my sketchbook, stood up, and walked toward the doorway beneath those aged, clawed letters.

–

After entering the Inn, my memories become garbled and blurred, like a film reel that's been scorched through. I remember sitting by the window, the pane dulling to indigo and black as night fell. Through a haze, I could see my hand clasped around a glass of gold liquor, pressing in so hard that the lead-stains stood out on my thumbprint and left a grey smear on the cup. Somewhere in the midst of that, I must have received Sophie's text, along with the photos of her room, as she'd promised, but I don't remember seeing it during my time at the bar. Maybe I was too far gone to notice the message, or maybe I was just too ashamed to read it.

As Sophie had said, I was underage, but that had never been a problem at the Marlowe Inn. Ever since I was fifteen, when Mum and Dad were too caught up in their drama to care where

I went, the bartenders here had never asked me my age. I was able to pay, and I doubt they knew my parents, so none of them bothered to check.

At some point, I finished my drink and left, and there my memory dissolves to fragments of the cathedral courtyard, the shell-streaked sand of the beach, and the moonlit cliffside jutting from beneath the ruins, covered with bruise-hued graffiti. I don't know exactly what I was doing. Maybe I was looking for Mum.

When my head had cleared enough to squeeze out a coherent thought – my temple gave a sharp throb – I found myself sitting with my back against the cliff face. Hard, dry grass grew in clumps beneath me, struggling like crabs out of the sand-choked stone. My sketchbook lay open beside me, and a yard in front of me, the shelf that I sat on fell into the North Sea, where waves of ink swelled and receded among long tendrils of rock. There were almost no stars, just a couple pinpricks, and the moon was chopped in half, so that its rabbit had no head.

My phone, glowing yellow as I tapped it to life, read, '2:47am.' I caught a glimpse of some texts from Sophie and Dad, but I couldn't bring myself to look at them, yet. I put my phone back in my pocket.

This had been Mum's cliffside, her spot to retreat. A couple months after Mum finally left for England, Sophie had moved into Dunbeath, so there was always an odd link between them in my mind. One had filled the place of the other, and now, they were both gone.

Once, almost three years ago, Mum had disappeared from the house, so I came out to Dunbeath Cathedral to look for her. I found her on this cliffside, her right cheek gleaming, her eyes soft and red.

It felt wrong to see her like that. Before I could sneak away, though, Mum turned and saw me. She gave a small, watery smile.

'James,' she said. 'You don't have to leave. Come on over.'

I came and sat down. As I watched the oystercatchers below, plucking at seaweed with their bright orange beaks, I snuck glances at the side of Mum's face, at the loose brown frizz hanging between her bun and forehead.

Mum looked at me. 'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I shouldn't keep vanishing on you and Blaire.' She hesitated. 'And Dad.'

'That's okay,' I murmured.

Mum made an almost amused sound, a kind of close-lipped huff, and she peaked her eyebrows at me. 'No,' she replied. 'It's not okay – not really.' She considered me for a moment.

Gathering up my nerve, I asked, 'You don't like living here, do you?'

Mum sighed, and she glanced up toward the sound of tourists chattering on McMurray Street. She shook her head. 'I stay for you and Blaire, but no, I don't like this town. I always feel trapped here. And it would do Grandpa a lot of good if I were with him now, with all the health issues he's having.'

Mum looked at me. With a faint frown, she asked, 'Do you like it here?'

I paused. 'I don't know,' I said. 'I like the beaches, Curry's, the theatre, and everything, and most of my friends are here. I wouldn't want to leave all that, but…' I shrugged.

'Of course,' Mum said. 'No one would make you do that.' She tilted her head, and something of her earlier question returned to her eyes. 'But you sounded unsure.'

'I mean…' I shrugged again. 'It would be harder if you weren't here. Dad's nice and everything, but I get annoyed with him, sometimes.'

'Hm.' Mum leaned back on her palms and considered the oystercatchers, again. 'It always makes me sad,' she reflected, 'how things turned out between you and your father. You're a lot alike: artistic, clever, focused…'

'Dad's alright,' I said.

'But you don't like him.'

I frowned at my knees. ‘I don’t know…When you have a lot of similarities with someone, you see all your flaws reflected back at you. It’s almost like you’re competing with them to be the best version of yourself.’

Mum nodded. ‘I can see that.’ With that, she began to stand, brushing the grass blades from her pants. ‘Well,’ she went on, ‘we’re still part of the same home. Let’s try to love each other for a bit longer, at least.’

Following her lead, I stood up as well, and we began to walk home.

For a bit longer, she’d said. For just a bit longer.

In the night, alone on the cliff’s edge, I wondered how much longer Mum had thought that would be, before she went the way of the giant panda and vanished for good.

A small ripple of black shifted at the corner of my eye. When I turned my head, I saw a stone drainage pipe gaping from the cliffside nearby, on level with the rock shelf I was sitting on. A shallow, eroded hole sank into the ground at its mouth, and in the pipe itself, a ruffled black head had appeared. It had conical ears and stout, whiskered cheeks.

I pulled back slightly, my legs tensing. The cat was a couple yards away, but I worried that it might bolt towards me. At the thought of it brushing against my leg, an almost squeamish strain crept into my arms. I’d had lots of interactions with Sophie’s calico, so my disgust wasn’t quite as strong as it could have been, but I felt sure that this stray was carrying some kind of disease, bacteria all clogged up in its dishevelled mane. For a moment, I resented Sophie’s pro-mammalian passions. It was only through the rare cat owner like her that we had feline strays at Dunbeath at all.

While I watched, the cat set one paw outside the drainage pipe. Its eyes glinted with scarlet shards, and thick fur splayed down its neck, hung in tangles from its belly. As a breeze picked up, the scent of stale alcohol wafted towards me.

We stared at each other. A minute or so passed, each of us asking the other a silent question, and slowly, my repulsion ebbed. I couldn't quite bring myself to Sophie's level. She could cuddle her calico as though it were a child's stuffed spider. Still, I increasingly felt that I understood this shadowy creature. Another wanderer, another prowler, seeking and hungering. The cat wasn't handsome, but I understood it.

When I moved to grab my sketchbook from the ground, the cat turned and padded back into the drainage pipe. I was almost disappointed to see it go.

My head gave another twinge, and I thought of Dad – probably sleepless, waiting for my return. When was the last time I'd made a drawing for Dad? Maybe I'd make him a portrait of himself, or of a cartoon character wearing his glasses and plaid shirt. He could choose which animal.

Noah J. Guthrie

Noah was born in Kirkcaldy, Scotland, and when he was five, he travelled with his family from the North Sea to Nashville. Fed on a steady diet of fantasy novels, he first wanted to be a wizard, then later decided to be a writer, realising that storytellers have just as much fun, but encounter fewer balrogs. He now studies creative writing at Berry College, near Rome, Georgia.

Ashes Rising

On the evening of Tuesday 3rd February, Dave Poultney, the drummer, phoned Ian Williams, rhythm guitarist and songwriter, and said that he'd listened hard and wasn't happy:

'That roll going into the last chorus, it's crap. You can hear my sticks.'

'It's hardly noticeable.'

'I noticed, mate.'

'Fair enough. Do it again?'

'Mix can put the clicks on halfway through the last verse. I can come in on top. Sorted.'

Ian suggested possible times to meet at Revenant Sound. When they'd decided on three he phoned Mix Hillier, who said Revenant was free for any of them. Dave and Ian went in, Mix cued up a blank track and triggered the clicks for the last verse, Dave did a perfect roll before the final chorus, Mix did his thing and the album was finished.

Ian was in the second term of the Upper Sixth, as were Ben Shipman, keyboard player, and Terry Bryant, bassist. Dave had left the school at sixteen, opting for a BTEC in Manufacturing Technology at a local FE College. Mix Hillier was in the Lower Sixth, insofar as he paid it any attention. Revenant Sound was his world.

It all sounded grander than it was. Everyone involved knew it and loved it for that reason. Ian had first got the band together near the start of Year 11. Ben had been the only musician, having taken piano lessons since he was eight and shown no signs of ditching them even when teenagehood began to assert its pains and exhilarations. His commitment had always fascinated Ian. It was like someone who, insisting on wearing short trousers through the years, turns them into a cool statement. He'd go over to Ben's house just to watch him practice. Soon Dave and Terry

joined him. They'd sit in a respectful row on the sofa while Ben gave them 'The Bluebells of Scotland' or, more adventurously, a passing feint at Schubert's 'The Trout' and the crazy up-down waves on 'Good Golly Miss Molly.' Then one time Terry had turned up with a tea-chest bass, a relic of an uncle's skiffle days, which he'd somehow managed to get on and off the bus. Bluebells and trout had absorbed a growly twang but Terry could keep good time. Soon Dave joined in, biffing one of the sofa cushions in a marriage of Latin beats and the hammering of an insistent bailiff. Ian saw, heard, fantasised. This could go somewhere. By happy chance, a cousin of his had recently decided that the chords to Buddy Holly's 'Learning the Game' and the riff to the B-52s' 'Rock Lobster' were just about it for him and his guitar. He sold it to Ian for ten quid and Ian got cracking. Meanwhile, Dave diversified his parents' woes by agitating for a basic drum kit. Terry did likewise till he was the proud if baffled owner of an acoustic bass guitar.

Occupied thus, they surfed their GCSE year, emerging with creditable enough results to avoid early admission to the dole queue, thriving in their part of the country. Ian started jotting ideas – for lyrics, he insisted, thereby dodging any accusation that he'd fallen foul of poetry. The ideas regretted what was yet to be, wearied of what had never happened. They grew into verses and Ben proved nifty with tunes. He and Ian recorded rough cuts on a dictaphone that Ben's estate-agent father had long since discarded, then played them to Dave and Terry, who listened with a care beyond any teacher's dreams. Over time, Ian and Ben's efforts acquired a solid 4/4 beat – at times, dizzily, 3/4 – and bass lines which graduated from the occasional stab to fair fluidity. Ian sought to augment Ben's piano with exotic chords. The evening he unlocked C-suspended-7th he got light-headed and had to sit still for a bit.

Inevitably there were logistical problems. A non-techno outfit, their rehearsals had to take place at Dave's, the alternative

being his dismantling of cymbals, tom-stands and the rest for carting here and there, an operation that would bite deep into precious time. He could never have set up his drums alongside Ben's piano: Ben's parents made that categorically clear. Ben alleviated the problem by mortgaging an upcoming birthday and Christmas for a portable keyboard. But that still left the matter of Dave's parents. They barely tolerated the invasion of their house, a sentiment endorsed by the neighbours either side. A venue was needed where only Dave and his bandmates could hear themselves. As for others hearing them, that existed as a hazy aim to be realised when they felt good and ready.

Beset by the rehearsal headache, the band's progress was stalled in the first term of the Lower Sixth. Aside from that, they needed time out to decide on a durable name. That is often the first point of business with any fledgling band and so it was with Ian and co. Since the band's inception, though, neither he nor the others had hit on anything that proclaimed what they were all about. So, absorbed in learning his and Ben's compositions and other songs to their taste, they'd made do with Just Us (Ben's suggestion, Shipwreck – a play on his surname – sounded plain doomy; Dave's suggestion, The Band, appealed mightily till Ian discovered that it had been taken long ago by 'some seriously old blokes'). It was during this troubled time that Terry mentioned Mick Hillier, a boy in the year below them.

They all vaguely knew him. He moved between this and that group at school but really, as another boy in his year remarked, he did his own walkabouts. He caught the same bus as Terry and so far they'd just nodded to each other…but now –

'He was asking about the band,' said Terry.

Ian frowned: 'How does he know about us?'

'Must've heard talk. Or someone told him. Anyway, this morning I was on about the hassle with rehearsal space and he said he could help out. And above and beyond.'

'Above and beyond?'

‘Yeah, he talks like that. Anyway, he says he’s got a sweet set-up.’ Terry gave a rueful smile. ‘He’s a bit weird.’

‘Weird is good.’

Mick Hillier was a child of sound. For years his bedroom had thrummed with it, each new gizmo taking its place in a steadily expanding universe. Some he bought himself; to others, like a savvy curator, he offered a safe home. He had vinyl. He had cassette-loaded computer games and an 80s keyboard and monitor to go with them. Walkmans and Discmans were kept in special boxes, each with a label giving their year of manufacture. IPods rested on cushions as in a jeweller’s display. CDs were alphabetised. Streaming-service icons were corralled in special zones on his screens. Headphones hung from carefully placed hooks, their wires without a kink. This was his world. He needed no other.

But space is finite, as are patience and nerves. The crux came when his mother and sister announced that either his noise went or he did…and anyway, what the hell was wrong with going outdoors with other kids once in a while? His father took the same line but with a surprise margin of compassion which moved him to observe that the new family car was small, which made the garage, unusually long anyway, longer still. Mick got the message. It inspired his hands. His father and married brother doing the heavy woodwork, he partitioned the back part of the garage, reopened the planked-up rear door, did numerous odd jobs to earn money for proofing foam and finally spent the whole of a Bank Holiday weekend shipping his treasures out to their new home. His final purchase was a pair of heavy-duty padlocks. Thus was his new heaven created, which he surveyed from a swivel-chair which his brother had blagged, while sounds old and new, from Caruso to The 1975 and beyond, flowed from grooves, tapes and websites deep into his ears.

It wasn’t long before restlessness crept in. Was he content to remain a passive auditor? Again his brother stepped up, securing

a four-track analogue tape-recorder and, in time, microphones and a modest mixing-desk. A neighbour's daughter was into gospel singing and had assembled a quartet with like-minded friends. They were Mick's first clients and he transferred their efforts from tape to cd. More gadgetry came his way. The gospellers returned. This time he captured them on tape, cd and mp4 files. They paid him for his pains, the money going towards pop-shields for the mikes. Somewhere along the line the rear portion of the garage became Revenant Sound. Soon he was recording local kids as they waded into pieces for grade exams on violins, flutes and, on one logistically challenging occasion, a full-sized harp. Ranging further, he devoted a whole weekend to Double Fault, a folk duo whose bodhran-player was a friend of his brother's and who specialised in what they called the alt-customising of old singalongs, 'Morphine in the Jar' being their showstopper. Round about that time 'Mick' disappeared. Now he was Mix.

And it was as Mix that he had lunchtime chats with Ian, Terry and Ben, followed by Friday-night chats with the whole band at The Druid's Head, an off-the-map pub in which, 'Well, you look 18' was the sole nod to compliance. The first term in the Lower Sixth drew to a close; Dave had his first assessed practicals at college, the payoff being an uncontentious home for his kit at Revenant Sound. As was his wont, Mix put in a burst on GCSE coursework and revision for mock-exams. Then, as if it were gratuitous padding in a delivery of must-haves, he laid all that aside. At a Druid's Head meeting just before Christmas, he told the band that they were Ashes Rising, adding that it was 'a phoenix thing.'

'I thought the phoenix rose from the ashes,' said Ian.

'Yeah, well,' said Mix, 'this phoenix keeps hold of them pending further use. Forward planning, you know?'

They didn't but each had his own beguiling vision of what the name was trying to say. It stuck.

As Christmas gave way to the new year, they stripped their songs to the bone and began to record several versions of each: 'shadings', Mix called them, which sounded like more phoenix-babble but was cheerily accepted. Typical of the process was track three, a piece of wistfulness about cloud shapes, which was variously gifted jazz-brushes, reggae beats and death-metal percussion. The band came to appreciate the old-school demands of Mix's four-track recorder, on which Dave's drums came first and everything else was layered over. There was no chance to re-record just a flat note here, a duff keyboard figure there. If someone fluffed it, they had to do their whole track again. The only wiggle-room they had was if Mix used three tracks and left one spare for emergencies or frills. As time went on, though, emergencies diminished. They just kept getting better.

And at no point did it trouble them that Mix was their junior. He was their suburban Svengali – never more so than that summer, when, through his brother – a man of apparently inexhaustible resources – he secured them a string of gigs: community centres, weekend parties, a cousin's 21st.

'Best thing,' he advised them, 'is listen and listen to the tracks we've done and decide which shadings appeal for each gig. Then you learn them note for note and play them that way. That's what Yes used to do.'

'They an ancient band?' asked Ian.

Not to Mix they weren't: for him all music existed in a head-buzzing present. But he just smiled and said, 'Trust me. These are your first gigs. You can cut loose later. Oh, and get some anthems under your fingers for encores.'

The phoenix-boy was right. They went down a storm each time and, as a reward for all the note-for-note work, were free to charge at 'Rockin' All Over the World' and 'Come On, Eileen' deep into the night.

Meanwhile, in the other world, homework and exams came and went, now towing higher ed. applications in their wake. The future started poking in like bum notes. Still, the proper business of life flowed on – more tracks and attendant shadings, more gigs – till the February evening when Dave and Ian headed for Revenant Sound, Dave got that drum-roll just right, Mix captured it on a blank track and then worked his magic.

The band got mp4s of their album, twenty-five songs, all 'shadings' included. They also got a cd apiece, with Mix's squiggle – *Pluming from the Ashes (Working Title)* – on one side.

'Now,' said Mix, 'for the artwork. And serious promotion. Meet at the Druid's next Friday night to consider phase one?'

If he'd just said, 'for a chat about the cover' or, 'to decide how many copies you want to give out' it would have been different. Either phrase might have cemented *Pluming from the Ashes (Working Title)* as a triumph of its time alone, an excellent thing to be treasured as the future prised the band's fingers loose and insisted that it didn't mess about. But 'phase one' announced what everyone involved had known since they felt their way into the first few songs. Mix and the band were meant for each other…meant to keep going. This wasn't some muso's idea of a holiday romance.

Even so, as the band arrived at The Druid's Head that Friday night, their heads hummed with all sorts – principally what their parents would say, what outrage would detonate, when they learned that their offspring were planning to chuck away their lives on noise and God knows what else. ('None of 'em live past forty,' Ian could hear his mother saying. Ben heard, 'Drugs, drugs, drugs' from his dad.) There before Mix, they got their drinks, bagged a corner table and, one by one, shared their tormenting voices.

'How are we going to manage?' asked Ben, already earmarked for a place at the Royal Northern College of Music.

‘It’ll take some planning,’ said Ian, whom October was meant to see at Liverpool with History books under his arm.

‘If we get more gigs and sell the album,’ said Terry, ‘we could find a place together.’ Once Economics at Leicester had appealed to him; now it didn’t.

‘We’d drive each other nuts,’ said Dave, who’d given a queasy *yes* to an apprenticeship at a laser process firm.

But these were the last knockings of fear and they retreated when the band saw Mix at the bar. He knew how it had to be – for him, for them. A coda of uncertainty made Ben dig into his pocket for a coin. Heads, he’d announce, and that other world would win. Tails and the Ashes would Rise on. But at that moment Mix turned, beamed and brandished a huge folder with *Game On* emblazoned across the front. Ben’s coin went towards his next pint.

Michael W. Thomas

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How To Play

The starting player is the person who last successfully stood up to a bully. Or whoever's birthday is next.

The game is played in three phases: PREPARATION, VENGEANCE, and GETTING AWAY WITH IT. Players work cooperatively to enact revenge.

Pick up your morals, shuffle them, and set them aside. They will not be used in this game.

Phase One: PREPARATION

Set the board to show the neighbourhood. Roll four green dice and calculate the total. Roll four red dice and calculate the total. The results correspond to the green numbers along the left-hand edge and the red numbers across the top edge of the board, creating a set of coordinates. Place the TARGET in the corresponding hex. This is the TARGET's starting position.

Take a moment to imagine what he's doing in that location. Up to no good? Minding his own business? You decide, you know him best.

Shuffle the ITEM deck and place it where everyone can read it.

Shuffle the TARGET MOVEMENT deck and place it as far away from yourselves as feasible.

Place the yellow POINT OF INTEREST marker on each of the hexes with a corresponding icon. The markers should start with the full yellow side face up.

Deal two TRIGGERED cards to each player. Do not look at them yet. Keep them close by, face down. Touch them every now and again to make sure they are still there.

On pieces of paper, privately write down something about yourself you consider to be a STRENGTH, and something you consider to be a WEAKNESS. Pass the STRENGTH to the player on your left, and the pass the WEAKNESS to the player on your right. All players will now have a new STRENGTH and a new WEAKNESS. Your old STRENGTHS and WEAKNESSES have gone. Take a moment to reflect on your new feelings. Don't feel too anxious; remember, you're all in this together.

Each player rolls the four green dice and the four red dice to determine the coordinates of their starting positions. N.B.: if any player lands on the same hex as the TARGET, or within two hexes of him, re-roll.

It's good to be keen, but you're not quite ready yet.

OBJECTIVE

Avoid detection by the TARGET and increase your individual COURAGE, FOCUS and CONTROLLED RAGE meters. You should also try to maintain a high level on your SISTERHOOD tracker, located at the top of the board. If at any time you disagree about a course of action, move one space down on your SISTERHOOD tracker. If you reach 0 on the SISTERHOOD tracker, your COURAGE and FOCUS meters drain, and your RAGE becomes uncontrolled.

You must split up and go home. You must never speak to each other again. The game is over.

Stay strong.

ORDER OF PLAY

The players move first, clockwise from the starting player. Roll two dice and move in any direction. If you reach a POINT OF INTEREST indicated by the yellow markers, you may

perform any two of the following actions, or the same action twice: SEARCH, OBTAIN an ITEM, STASH an ITEM, or SET A TRAP.

SEARCH: Roll a single dice. Count off this number of cards from the top of the ITEM deck, keeping the cards face down as you draw. Reveal the *next* card. If this is an ITEM, you may use your next action to try and OBTAIN it. You may also decide to leave it face up for another player to attempt to OBTAIN. If the card is blank, you find nothing. You may SEARCH a second time as your second action, however if you draw a blank card during the second SEARCH, you make NOISE, and the TARGET moves two hexes in your direction.

OBTAIN: Follow the instructions on the ITEM card to attempt to OBTAIN it. Resolve any outcomes. If you fail to OBTAIN, you may try again as a second action. If you fail again, you make NOISE, and the TARGET moves three hexes in your direction. If the TARGET catches you during your attempt to OBTAIN the ITEM, you may collect and use the ITEM during VENGEANCE. It's right there, why wouldn't you just grab it?

STASH: Use one action to STASH an ITEM. Some stashed ITEMS are useful during the GETTING AWAY WITH IT phase. Some ITEMS may be better used by a different player who has a higher score on their various meters. Once STASHED, an ITEM must be RE-OBTAINED in the same manner, following the OBTAIN instructions.

SET A TRAP: Some ITEMS can be combined to make a TRAP. For example: the AXE and the WIRE, or the SHARPENED BAMBOO and the SPADE. If an individual player has the right combination of ITEMS in their hand, they may SET A TRAP at any of the POINTS OF INTEREST. Two or more players could meet at the same hex to combine ITEMS to SET A TRAP. Only one of the players in such a meeting needs to use the SET A TRAP action.

N.B.: When an ITEM has been OBTAINED from a POINT OF INTEREST, flip the yellow marker to the half-grey side. When a second ITEM is OBTAINED from a POINT OF INTEREST, the marker is removed. When all POINTS OF INTEREST have been exhausted in an area (i.e.: the PARK, or SUPERMARKET) the area becomes off-limits. Any traps are removed, but STASHED ITEMS must remain in place for the GETTING AWAY WITH IT phase.

MOVING THE TARGET

After all players have taken their turn, the TARGET makes two complete turns.

Reveal the top TARGET MOVEMENT card. The card will show a set of coordinates alongside an icon of a single or numerous dice. Roll that many dice. The result is the number of hexes the TARGET will move towards the coordinates. He always travels in the most DIRECT ROUTE. If he reaches those coordinates, he will stop and not move further.

Never one to exert himself, was he? Except when it mattered.

If the TARGET comes within two hexes of a player, that player is SPOTTED.

SPOTTED PLAYER: Turn over one of your TRIGGERED cards. Follow the instructions. Answer the TARGET's questions with conviction. Really convince him. You know what he's like. If you fail your TRIGGERED card, you will lose COURAGE and/or FOCUS. If you succeed your TRIGGERED card, you gain one COURAGE, and the SISTERHOOD tracker moves up twice. Whether you succeed or fail your TRIGGERED card, you must flee. Roll one dice three times to RUN AWAY AND HIDE. You will skip your next turn because you are hiding.

N.B.: In some scenarios, the TARGET will chase you as you RUN AWAY AND HIDE. If he catches up, you must play your second TRIGGERED card. If this card says he gives chase, ignore it. He will not chase a second time in a row. He's not that desperate.

After SPOTTING a player, the TARGET's current turn immediately ends. Seeing you made him forget what he was doing and where he was going.

If the TARGET moves onto the same space as a player, VENGEANCE is immediately triggered. Move to Phase Two.

OTHER TARGET SCENARIOS

If the TARGET lands on an exposed ITEM, that ITEM is discarded to the ITEM discard pile. All players lose one COURAGE but gain one CONTROLLED RAGE. The discarding of some ITEMS causes the SISTERHOOD tracker to move downward once.

If the TARGET lands on a TRAP, the TRAP is activated, and the TARGET is injured. Take a moment here to describe the wound. Really visualise it. Let him suffer for a while. Adjust the TARGET INJURY tracker accordingly. The SISTERHOOD tracker moves once upwards per injury. When the TARGET is injured to 5, 10 or 18 points, the SISTERHOOD tracker moves twice upwards, and all players gain one COURAGE.

If a location has been exhausted of all its ITEMS and is off-limits, the TARGET will not visit it. It's as if he knows his doom is coming. Instead, the TARGET should be moved towards his HOUSE. If he's inside the HOUSE already, he doesn't move. Revel in his inertia.

As play continues, the game board will shrink until it becomes impossible to avoid confrontation. When ready, move onto the same hex as the TARGET and commence phase two.

Phase two: VENGEANCE

It is time to right the wrongs. It is time to make him suffer. For what he has done.

But you've known his power. And his propensity for violence. He is cunning and wily and stops at nothing. He thinks an awful lot of himself. He's been ready for this moment his whole life, as if everything has been leading up to now. Perhaps he has fantasised about it. That would be just like him, wouldn't it? Hero, villain, and victim of his own story.

Players act first. Calculate your COORDINATION. This is your SISTERHOOD score added to your individual

CONTROLLED RAGE scores. If this is 50 or higher, you get a total of three attack rolls before the TARGET has time to react. Between 25-49, you get two attack rolls, anything lower, just one.

Pool together any ITEMS you have OBTAINED. Their DAMAGE rating plus your FOCUS and COURAGE scores is your total POWER. This determines how many dice you will use when attacking. Refer to the chart on the back of this booklet. N.B.: some ITEMS will have special attributes; some will have drawbacks.

Note the coordinates of the TARGET's hex, then move all player counters and the TARGET counter to the RAGE ARENA. Draw a random RAGE ARENA card and follow the instructions. Make careful note of any environmental effects. Some will be in your favour, some will not.

Begin your attack.

Roll your attack dice.

Roll the TARGET's defence dice.

Sixes are direct hits. Ones are misses.

Any fives, fours, threes, or twos you roll are cancelled out by any fives, fours, threes, or twos the TARGET rolls. Any dice not cancelled scores one direct hit.

Describe those hits. Really lean into the details. State which ITEM you are using and how you use it. Which part of him do you strike? Get creative. Use two ITEMS at once if you like. Or don't use any ITEMS. Just use your hands and feet and teeth. It's totally up to you.

We'd say one hit is equal to one notch of damage on the injury tracker, but this is your VENGEANCE so you decide. Just make sure you leave enough for the others. Don't climax too soon. He can't deny you your pleasures anymore. Enjoy them. Take your time.

When he rolls his attack dice, don't bother defending. He always misses. This is not his moment. He's used up all his moments. He's had plenty.

Keep rolling your dice. Keep inflicting wounds. Watch him grow weaker and weaker. Squeeze that INJURY TRACKER for as much juice as it will give you. Use half notches if you like. You make the rules now.

But he will die. He has to die. Bring the death knell. Think about it carefully, then execute it.

Describe that final moment.

Write it down.

Memorise it.

Make a small pile of your STRENGTHS and WEAKNESSES. Add the final death moment to the pile.

Burn the pile.

Scatter the ashes.

He's done.

Move to Phase Three.

Phase Three: GETTING AWAY WITH IT.

He's done, but you are not. Now comes the hard part.

During this phase you must: CLEAN UP THE CRIME SCENE, DISPOSE OF THE BODY, and ESCAPE.

Return the player counters to the TARGET's hex on the neighbourhood board. Return the TARGET counter but lay it on its side. It is now referred to as THE CORPSE.

Draw a random NEIGHBOURHOOD card. Place CONCERNED NEIGHBOURS and BUSY-BODIES on the hexes indicated. If you land on the same hexes as these individuals during this phase, be ready with your excuses. The former will ask relatively simple questions. The latter will pry. Remember: you are likely to be covered in blood.

Set the AUTHORITIES timer to match your SISTERHOOD rating. The lower your rating, the less time you will have. Do not dawdle.

Whichever player has the highest FOCUS rating will begin. If there is a tie for FOCUS, refer to COURAGE. If there is still a tie, refer to CONTROLLED RAGE. If there is still a tie, decide which of you dealt the most damage to the TARGET. This player is now the leader. She decides how things are going to go down, and she will assign the roles. The more you disagree, the more time you waste.

The clock is ticking.

Deal five CLEAN UP cards to the player responsible for CLEAN UP. Deal five DISPOSAL cards to the player responsible for DISPOSAL. Deal five ESCAPE cards to the player responsible for ESCAPE. Study these cards like your life depends on it. Your life depends on it.

Each player takes their own pair of dice, no matter the colour now, and rolls simultaneously. Keep rolling, keep going, don't wait for each other, but be synchronised. If you need help, ask for it. Don't worry; stay cool. Panic only draws attention.

Stalk across the board to acquire STASHED ITEMS that might be useful. Nowhere is off-limits now. You no longer need to OBTAIN an ITEM, unless stated on that ITEM's card. Just grab what you need. There is no time to stay quiet. Players can meet on hexes to exchange ITEMS, but don't fuss. Make it look like you're just a couple of friends catching up about old times.

Play your GETTING AWAY WITH IT cards at opportune moments. Don't waste them. Look out for the Neighbourhood Watch symbol. When this appears, you must draw another NEIGHBOURHOOD card and move the CONCERNED CITIZENS and BUSY-BODIES accordingly. Be ready with those excuses.

If a CONCERNED CITIZEN or BUSY-BODY lands on the same hex as THE CORPSE, get there quick and kill them. You

now have two bodies to dispose of. You may end up with multiple. For every corpse you acquire, deal out three more DISPOSAL and three more CLEAN-UP cards.

Keep your chins up. Keep focused. Use your SPECIAL ABILITIES, if you've acquired any.

Remember your STRENGTHS and WEAKNESSES, even though they're burned and gone.

You've got this.

Believe in yourselves.

Remember what he did to you. That will give you strength.

The AUTHORITIES timer will change tone when there are five minutes left. Is the crime scene CLEAN? Is the body DISPOSED? Do you have a route of ESCAPE?

Focus now. Consolidate.

Keep those rolls pure and clean. From chaos comes clarity.

You've got this.

You're the SISTERHOOD.

You've always been more powerful than you've ever imagined.

When the AUTHORITIES timer reaches two minutes remaining, it becomes a distant alarm. The alarm draws ever closer. It'll soon be time to go, girls. Time to get the hell out of Dodge.

But wait. Think about finger smudges. Hair follicles. Shoe prints. Have you considered how you'll get past roadblocks? What's going to cover the smell of decay? Or are you taking the body with you? Do you really want to keep him that close?

And where will you go? The same place, or will you split up?

Have you thought it all through?

Come on, have you?

There's no turning back now.

Ignore the rules, just use things, everything and anything.

Grab the saw, cut off the head.

Find it in the discard pile if you must.

The saw not the head. The discard pile is not a good place for a head.

Don't think about it.

If you think about it, you won't do it.

Do you have an actual saw?

Or a sharp bread knife?

Cut the actual head off THE CORPSE piece.

We promise it will help.

You're not going to play this game again. You're done here. You've made your mark. Get in there and take that head off. You can always order another one through our website.

There's no going back now.

This is it.

You're through the looking glass.

You've smashed the looking glass.

You've ground the pieces of looking glass into his face.

With twenty seconds to go, those sirens get unbearably loud.

OK it's *really* time to go now.

They're here.

They're turning the corner at the end of the street.

You can see the lights: red-blue, red-blue.

Go. Now. Nothing else matters.

Flip the board.

Scatter the pieces.

Hug each other.

Run.

David Hartley

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The Highland Line

After a short pause at a busy station in a cheerful tourist town the train swung through a mile or two of tame green farmland and then shot into a dark wooded pass with the suddenness of going into a tunnel. A peat-dark river foamed on the right as the train threaded the green gloom until, after a couple of minutes, the pass opened out and we were in the Highlands.

It didn't seem *real*; more like a movie special effect. Great hills rose on either side in their summer green fuzziness and a dazzlingly blue loch spread out on the right. The gradient must have eased, for the growling of the diesel locomotive faded and the only sounds were the clatter of wheels on metal and the occasional whoosh as a large burn surged beneath the line and sought out the loch.

Just twenty minutes after leaving the busy tripper town we arrived at the next station. My mother opened the door of the coach, urged me out on to the platform and propelled the luggage after me. Finally, the door clanged behind us and, with a snort like a pawing thoroughbred, the locomotive jolted into life again and drew its coaches away. The train became a receding murmur and my mother and I stood, like refugees, among the scattered luggage. Across the line, on the southbound platform, was a neat station building and a small garden centred on a brightly painted statue of a heron. Its beak pointed skyward and its wings stretched out. But, I thought, it would never fly.

To both west and east, wooded hills rose and greater peaks soared grey and gaunt beyond. A figure appeared on the southbound platform, my grandfather, waving and shouting for us to stay until he came across to help with the luggage. He was a strong, cheerful man with a red face and a white beard, like Father Christmas would have looked if he'd been a forestry worker.

‘Let’s get you two to the house, eh?’ he said after giving Mum a hug. ‘Yer grandmother’s been baking, Fraser.’ He smiled to me, ruffling my hair. The train was still pulsing faintly in the distance. We crossed the footbridge and walked through the village.

–

I’m back there now, in that same Highland village, studying a photograph that a friend, a railway enthusiast, has given me. It shows a train, drawn by a diesel locomotive like the one I remember, pulling away from the village station on a bright morning in summer. It could easily be our train, but there’s no sign of Mum or me or Grandad. The wrong figures inhabit the landscape, but the station looks the same as I remember it and such is the clarity of the print, so bright are the colours, that the picture could have been taken yesterday. But it’s over fifty years old, that picture, and everything has changed.

–

This sudden flight north could have been difficult for an eight-year-old to cope with, but after that train journey, through the magical pass into a land of hills and lochs and forests, it felt like a holiday. After Grandma and Grandad had plied me with tea and cakes I was sent outside so that the adults could talk and I crossed the quiet main road and explored the village. I went back into the station and stood by the heron to watch a steam-hauled goods train puff by, explored the broad, rippling river that bordered the village and threw stones into its cola-coloured depths. I saw my first red squirrel, which disappeared into a tall pine tree. When I arrived back in the house, the mood had changed. Grandad was out in the garden shed, trying to summon the football results on a transistor radio (it was the first day of

the new season) and Grandma had her arm round my tearful mother. I fled upstairs to the bedroom Mum and I were to share.

–

I'm now standing where the entrance to the station must have been. There is a constant hum of traffic on the road and cars and white vans and timber lorries whizz past, ignoring the speed limit signs. There is no railway now and a sheltered housing complex stands where the station did. I cross the road – taking my life in my hands – and walk towards the row of forestry houses. Number 1 had been my grandparents' house. I unlock the front door and open it, setting off clattering echoes in the empty and cleared rooms of the house. Some odd bits of furniture remain, things too old or damaged to sell. I sit in a fusty armchair and wait.

–

Grandad promised me a treat on Saturday, a week to the day after Mum and I arrived. On the Friday night he disappeared back into his shed and rummaged noisily for a while, finally emerging with his own fishing tackle and some ancient-looking equipment for me. 'This was my first rod,' he explained, 'and yer Grandma said I should chuck it out but I said it would come in handy.'

Early on Saturday morning we went to the station. Grandad sent me over to the northbound platform with the fishing tackle while he bought tickets and chatted to the stationmaster. I stood looking across the line at the heron, thinking about its dreams of flight. Two local women were seated on a bench waiting for the train. They lowered their voices after my arrival but I could still hear some of their whispers; 'Aye, left her man…bad to her…hit the wean as well…'

–

A car draws up outside the empty house. I hear its doors open and close and I look out of the window; it's a sporty white Toyota, spotlessly clean. The occupants are already heading for the front door; a shaven-headed young man in an expensive dark suit and a pair of dark sunglasses, and a young blonde woman in a navy business suit with a short skirt and teeteringly high heels. She wears dark glasses too; it's actually quite dull today.

I let them in and soon they're following me through the house, making scribbled notes on their clipboards and occasionally pausing to check messages on their iPhones. 'Signal's a bit weak here,' says the young woman, disapprovingly.

'Aye, built council houses to last back then,' says the man, tapping a window-frame. 'The location couldn't be better except it's a bit close to the main road. It was in your family, you said?'

'Yes, my grandparents'. Grandad worked for the Forestry Commission. He bought it in the late eighties after he retired. Then my mum moved here, but she died…'

'Shall we have a look upstairs?' the woman breaks in.

–

Grandad joined me on the northbound platform and nodded to the two gossips. The train swept in and we climbed aboard. It was busy with tourists and trippers and walkers and a few other anglers but we eventually found seats in a cheery, noisy coach near the middle. Soon I was gripped by the view to our right as the train climbed high up the western side of a rocky glen and an alarming drop developed. A shining loch, blue as a St Johnstone jersey, shimmered in the sun far below us.

‘That’s Loch Earn,’ said Grandad. ‘Used to be good fishing there but there are too many eejits in boats now. We’ll get peace where we’re going.’

Half an hour later we pulled into an abandoned-looking station; the signboards read ‘Tyndrum Lower’ – the name on our tickets – so I grabbed my fishing tackle and prepared to clamber off, but Grandad told me to stay. ‘It’s all right. I had a word with the guard.’

The locomotive’s klaxon parped and it chugged forward, the coaches jerking into life behind it. A few minutes later a calm, blue lochan, green-fringed with reeds, appeared on our left. The guard appeared at the end of the coach and waved to Grandad as the train shuddered to a stop.

The guard opened the door and a terrifying drop loomed down to the ground. Grandad jumped carefully onto the ballast and then caught me when the guard lowered me by the shoulders. Finally, the guard handed down our rods and packs, shouted good wishes, and slammed the door closed again. We watched the train clatter off and soon we were left with just the sounds of lapping water and skylark-song.

‘Good lads on that train,’ said Grandad, ‘saves us the walk and gives us an extra half-hour of fishing.’

We set our rods, Grandad lit a pipe and we listened to the chiming of water birds and the occasional car on the Oban Road. Now and then a train chugged past and the earth seemed to shake.

‘Are ye all right, Fraser?’ said Grandad. ‘Ye’re no missing yer dad or anything?’

‘Only sometimes,’ I said. ‘Not really. Do you think we’ll catch anything?’

–

I stand by the estate agents’ Toyota.

‘It needs a good bit of redecoration and brightening up, yeah?’ says the shaven-headed man.

‘Updating, yeah. It’s a bit nineteen-fifties,’ says the woman.

‘Yeah. But it’s a solid build and in a fantastic area. Should be no problem selling it. Market it down south as a ‘Highland Holiday Home’ and we’re laughing. That’s where the big money is.’

I say I’ll be in touch with them and watch as the vehicle revs away in a spray of gravel. They can hardly wait to get away, back to the city.

–

About a week remained until the end of the school holidays. I woke up to find that Mum wasn’t at home. She had a waitressing job in the village’s big hotel but didn’t usually start until lunchtime. As we ate toast and Sugar Puffs, Grandma explained that Mum had gone into Glasgow on the early train but would be back later on. Why didn’t the two of us get a train to the busy tourist town and have a wee treat?

As we waited on the southbound platform I looked around me at the soaring forested hills; Grandad was working somewhere in there. I ran my hand over the cold painted stone of the heron’s upraised bill. ‘Lovely thing, isn’t it?’ said Grandma.

The train rumbled through the dark wooded pass and then we shot out into the green fields and it felt like God had switched on the lights again. ‘We’re in the Lowlands, now,’ explained Grandma. ‘We’ve just crossed the Highland Line.’

We arrived at the resort town’s busy, sprawling station and Grandma took me to the shows and watched as I went on the waltzers and the chair-o-planes and the dodgems. Then we went back to the wee cafe in the corner of the main station building. ‘They do ice creams here and I can have tea and a scone,’ said Grandma. I got some vanilla ice cream with flakes of chocolate

on top and a glass of ginger. Grandma seemed happy and cheerful but when I had finished my ice cream she looked more serious, wiped the ice cream from round my mouth with a paper hanky, and said, 'Now, Fraser – yer mother's gone to Glasgow to see about a job.'

I sooked ginger through a straw and said, 'But she's working in the hotel here! She disnae need another job!'

'Aye, and she's right good at what she does. They're already letting her do other things because she's so handy. There's a job in Glasgow, at the North British, where she'll be working behind a desk and get a uniform to wear. She's a bright lassie, your mother.'

'But where will she stay? She cannae stay with…Dad…'

'She's going to stay with her pal – her ye call yer Auntie Jessie? Until she can get a place of her own.'

I didn't say anything.

'But you'll have to stay with us for a while. Go tae the school here in the village. Ye've made lots of pals here already, eh? Just till yer mother gets a place.'

I thought of Mum and the house we'd lived in with Dad and our hurried journey on the train to the village and Grandma and Grandad's house. And then I thought of the still, silent heron.

'Drink yer ginger,' said Grandma.

–

I lock the door of the house and shoulder my bag. There's a bus to Edinburgh in ten minutes. On the way to the stop I pause at a garden gate; a long green lawn spreads out in front of an austere Victorian villa in grey stone. There's a small formal garden in the middle of the lawn and its centrepiece is that painted stone heron, wings still outstretched and bill reaching yearningly for the sky. It's had a few licks of paint since 1965, and it has flown

a few hundred yards from the vanished station. It's always possible to escape, but sometimes it doesn't get you very far.

The bus, a smoothly thrumming express coach, arrives. I prepare to board it for the journey back across the Highland Line.

David McVey

David McVey lectures in Communication and Literature at New College Lanarkshire. He has published over 120 short stories and a great deal of non-fiction that focuses on history and the outdoors. He enjoys hillwalking, visiting historic sites, reading, watching telly, and supporting his home-town football team, Kirkintilloch Rob Roy FC.

Stoneheart

From the deck of the beach house, I watch them in the bay: my tall quiet father in thrall to my small bossy daughter. He follows her into rockpools, digs ponds for her in the soft sand at the sea edge, kicks up spray rainbows in high arcs around her. Later, he sits with her above the tideline sorting pebbles, selecting the best ones to rinse and bring to me, glinting like treasure, in a bucket of seawater. He catches me watching them and waves, smiling reassuringly, as if to say: *they're just pebbles.*

Someday I will show Lucija the letter her grandfather wrote to me last summer. She will understand then why I watched them all the time, never wanting to miss a moment of his happiness.

Moja Draga Kćeri,

I know you were worried at the beach today when I froze up like that. You said maybe it was time to talk about it, but there are still things I am not permitted to talk about, even if I wanted to, which I don't. But little Lucija's gesture struck a strange chord with me today and I have decided to write down just this one thing, to help you to stop worrying about me and to understand that it was not as bad or as hard as you may imagine.

Early in our Unit's training, they began to teach us techniques to manage extreme stress. These ideas were new then, ahead of their time. We were assigned a senior medic, Captain Vukovic, a shrink I guess, who taught us how to retreat to a visualised space in which we felt safe. He called it our 'happy place,' with what I later understood to be deep irony. The trick was to call it up in rich detail until we could taste the air of it and hear the sounds. In my sessions with him I described a beach near my

childhood village in the south. By describing it again and again, I learnt to build a vivid image of the quiet cove nestled below the cliff face. I could picture myself looking up the dizzying line of the cliff to the sky, or out beyond the headland where the whitecaps began. I learnt to match my breathing to the imagined rhythm of the waves, sensing salt and sunshine with every inbreath, hearing gulls and the sway of marram grass with each outbreath.

A few weeks later in the Ops room, they showed me an image of my beach, black with smoke and swirling ash, thick oil slicks along the shoreline, an armoured car firing shells into the crumbling cliff. Another image followed: the beach at sunset strewn with corpses, grasses ablaze, the shallows red with blood, the sky black. It wasn't real – they were manufactured images – but they were cleverly done, superimposed on photographs of the real beach. They watched to see how I would react. I guess they did it to everyone in my cohort, but it was one of the many things we never talked about.

At our next session, the shrink asked me what I had learned, how I might build a mental construct that would protect me better. I was reluctant to speak, still angry at how they had played me.

'I'm trying to give you tools,' he said, evenly.

'So you can weaponise them against me?' I spat.

'But they're still tools,' he said.

As our training progressed, I began to understand how important this so-called 'happy place' would be, the name now clearly a euphemism for the need to control terror, hunger, pain and despair. I experimented with many different places, each one smaller and safer than the last: the back porch looking out over my grandmother's garden; the den my brother and I built in the narrow gap behind our father's shed; the library corner in the village school. As I conjured up each image, I enjoyed its security for a while and then did their job for them, imagining

all the ways it could be spoiled, violated, laid waste. I went smaller and smaller still, until eventually I found a place so surprisingly tiny and yet so solid and impenetrable that I knew I would be safe there.

Many weeks later when the training was almost at an end, Vukovic announced that we were going to revisit my happy place.

'I want you to go there now,' he said. I closed my eyes, steadied my breathing, and went there with ease. 'Describe it to me.'

I began a detailed description of the beach, although that was not where I was. He didn't let me get far.

'I know that's not it,' he barked. 'Tell me where you really are.'

I described instead my grandmother's back porch: the flaky paint on the rail and the steps down to her straggly patch of lawn, the gnarly pear tree. When I started on the smell of the sweet peas, he cut across me sharply, swearing and shouting – vile things about my grandmother, my mother – all part of the drill. I didn't react.

'You're lying. Tell me the truth.' I looked directly at him.

'Is that an order, Sir?' He held my gaze, nodded.

I told him about running the gauntlet of high green nettles to get to our den behind the shed. When he rejected that with much furious yelling I told him about the library corner, the books crammed at every angle onto the shelves, their colourful spines, their dry smell. He became exasperated, screaming up close that he would set fire to the books, the schoolroom, the children.

'You're lying! Tell me the truth.'

'I'm not lying, Sir.' Round and round we went: the beach, the porch, the den, the library – more tiny details every time eliciting more threats and fury, until at last he sat down.

‘You’re still there, aren’t you?’ he asked, quietly. I said nothing. ‘And yet you’re not displaying one single tick or tell that shows me you’re lying.’ He nodded, satisfied. ‘You have your place of safety, Damjan. Never give it up.’

He stood and I saluted him; we were done.

I know now that Captain Vukovic helped save my life. Through all the hardships of our campaign, through the frozen months in the mountains, the times of near starvation, the shelling and raids and close combat, I had a place to go where nothing could touch me. Others didn’t fare so well.

What was my secret? I could shrink myself down into the imaginary heart of a smooth brown pebble. The pebble I imagined was one I had picked up as a small boy and later lost, but I could recall the even shape and weight of it: a disc curved at the centre like a mint imperial; mottled donkey-brown in colour; a thin red stripe of ore across the middle.

I taught myself to put on the pebble like armour, feeling it all around my tiny molecule of self, cool and hard and infinitely strong. I became its memory. I remembered all the waves that smoothed it, all the tides that raked it over the seabed, all the time spent in the rock pool under wafting yellow tendrils of seaweed. I remembered the small white hand that lifted it from the pool one day and felt its pleasing shape; the boy who held it up to catch a sun glint across its rusty-red stripe. I remembered the gravelly voice and strong fingers of the boy’s grandmother who stopped shelling chestnuts to examine what he showed her. I remembered it in a trouser pocket, knocking companionably against a penknife, a found wooden chess piece, a fragment of twine. I remembered it as a talisman against pirates and dragons in the quiet library corner, a small thumb working its surface in rhythmic circles. I remembered it falling silently through a hole in a worn pocket, landing somewhere soft, near enough to

witness the small boy searching his tin-roofed den, sifting the surrounding nettles, combing the nearby grass, finally giving up with a shrug. It was only a pebble.

Only a pebble; but fire couldn't touch it, blades bounced off it, tanks and trucks and studded boots could only press it down into the soft sand and mud, and I could stay there, intact, in the stony heart of it, for as long as I needed to.

The stone that Lucija held out to me at the beach today looked so like that pebble it shocked me. For a moment I feared it, as if to take it from her would be to take back every awful thing from those times and to leave myself with nowhere to hide. What nonsense; when she placed it into my palm, and curled my fingers around it, I saw that it was only a pebble, a smooth brown pebble from a sandy little hand. Only a pebble, but in the innocent giving of it I finally understood, as you must too my darling, that those dark times were necessary; those things I did were the things that had to be done to reclaim a world for you and for her in which a pebble is just a pebble, and in which I have no need of a place to hide.

Your loving Papa, always.

Lesley Evans

Lesley Evans is retraining as a storyteller after a first career as a lawyer and business leader. She is currently studying for an MA in Creative and Critical Writing at the University of Gloucestershire. She writes mainly micro flash and flash fiction

and has been published in three competition anthologies and on a number of flash fiction websites.

Diminishing Worlds

She finds the sandy track that leads to the dunes and takes off her sandals. There's a chill in the air, and the sky looks like porridge with clouds thick enough to stand a spoon in. The marram whips her bare legs, but the sand feels cool and silky between her toes. Pulling the towel tighter around her shoulders, she comes up over the top of the dunes and finally sees the water. The tide is out a long way but, even from here, she can see the sea rearing and foaming like a pack of rabid dogs.

Beyond the dunes' shelter, the wind is ice-cream cold. Salt stings her cheeks, briny air in her nostrils. She reaches the strand line, where the tide achieves its limit, and just beyond her now are the birds – knots, she thinks, oystercatchers and black-backed gulls. Heads bobbing up and down like typewriter keys, cracking crabs and prawns, unpicking snails that hide in the pools and beneath the dulse and bladderwrack. It won't be long now before she's too close for them, and suddenly there they go, lifting away in one huge, spreading monochrome wing.

The beaks screech and whistle and pipe.

–

The gull floats into the thick sky, beats its sooty wings against the chilled air. It is a white-grey scythe slicing through the low brim of cloud. Dark iris in a blood and yolk coloured eye sees the landscape diminish, the fishing boat cresting the wave, the swell of the water, the figure on the beach. The sound of the sea is now just a breathy shush in its tiny ear cavity. It makes for the cliffs, where the kittiwakes and shearwaters nest, hears the panic in their calls as it comes too close to the ledges. It skims the cliff face. Beaks snap at it as it passes, then it turns and heads back to the beach.

On a watery updraft it hovers, wings twitching to maintain the hold. It waits, wheels away, turns and waits again. Screeches to its kind. Is it safe? Is it safe? The figure enters the water, and the gull swoops to the shore. Up comes the sand, the shingle, the froth-line of the retreating wave. Larger and larger again. The tang of wet salt fills the punctures in its beak. Yellow feet come down, wings are tucked away. It joins the other gulls on the strandline, hungry for the soup-crunchy morsels that hunker in the shingle and sand.

The beak searches.

–

Tight in a glassy-pink whorl. Safe dark of the glossy weed. Wet-grit-sand. Sucking of lugworms below. Sand fleas ticking over the shingle. Salt-water licks, shallower and shallower, tide slipping away. Danger time. Claw-poised and tentacle-intuited, retreats further into the mineral twist. Shell against shell. Vibrations along the shore. Coming closer. Motionless but for the twitch of tentacles. Still, still, still.

And advancing still, still, still. There is noise everywhere – feet slapping, bill snapping. Light breaches the dark of the weed. Knock-knock. Knock-knock. Scent of feathers and fishiness.

The beak enters the opening of the shell.

–

The pale pewter sand flea hops. Springs erratically over the shoreline debris.

The beak misses.

–

Karen Waldron

Karen is a freelance copywriter and editor, who enjoys writing short and flash fiction in her spare time. She lives in Surrey, England, with her husband and three children, a cat who sometimes deigns to join them, and two stick insects that care even less.

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