

constellations



an anthology
2026 BA Creative Writing Cohort

Constellations

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Like stars to the sky, we decorate our environment with words,
our experiences, and our observations—like a constellation, we
are grouped by our passion for writing.

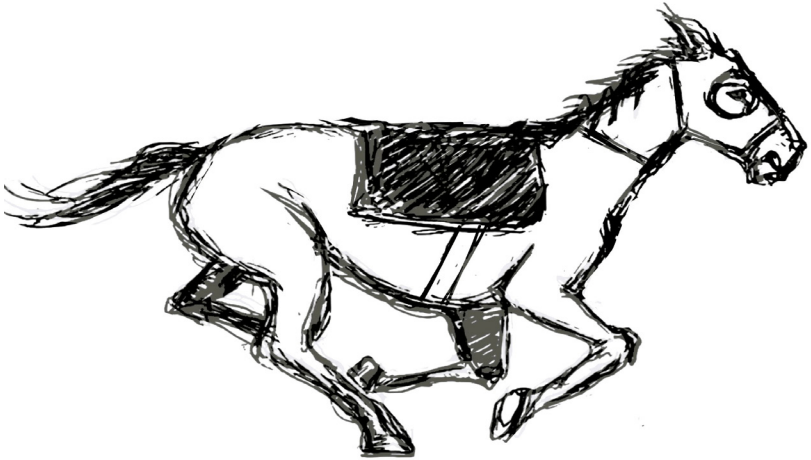
Constellations is an anthology of prose of many genres, poetry,
creative non-fiction and script, collated by the University of Lin-
coln's BA Creative Writing class of 2026.

The Posthumous Racing Post

Anais Mager

Anais Mager is an English writer from Scunthorpe. She developed a love for literature through her mother's bedtime readings of Enid Blyton's *The Famous Five* and Agatha Christie's *Poirot*.

When not writing, she can be found on a spin bike or applying fake tan.



Bets can be placed on the length of one's life or the misery that ultimately ends it. Gambling with such an event seems, simply, an egregious act of disregard for the weight of one's purpose. For some, however, putting money on a man's expiry reflects well of his life in the bookies. Yardsticks of longevity create solace in what we know to be so certain yet entirely unknown.

'This'll be my last, pet,' and he would bow his head to the fir tree embalmed in tinsel, the noose of a bauble upon each branch. It was always the last Christmas and then one day such premonitions became so: a comment laughed off until it was not.

My grandfather and his adoration for horse racing are two memories intertwined in my adult mind. And so, it feels almost dutiful to share his story alongside the horses he bet on.

His race began (if not considering the horse's rearing) when he followed his job from the Northeast coast to Yorkshire. It was here he met a woman as warm as the summer month she shared a name with. June. Her hair a platinum dahlia, fell past the shoulders as its petals in a breeze; perhaps such an introduction was the penultimate opening of his starting stall. My own enamorment with such a wonderful woman makes it simple to understand how a man became so deeply enthralled by her soul.

Hurdles manifested in the form of fatherhood, of which he cleared effortlessly. A tough exterior became the groundwork for such effective teachings of life, that seem today to course through my disposition as his. A gruff voice, taking that one tone of which you knew it was time to behave. Haply, he created such a legacy through myself and the bloodline I follow.

When longer days ensued and the stars' light stretched vastly above coke furnaces and smog, off he doddered down to the shed.

Alongside the racing, he was most inclined to fixate on technological advancement. There was no hesitation to monopolise his *gadgets*, named aptly after a long-standing love for Bond. As time pursued and such gadgets progressed, the bets moved from paper to screen. Saturday mornings circling the sport section were replaced by his online applications and he seemed to surpass the furlongs faster than ever.

Darley Arabian, an eighteenth-century thoroughbred, is remembered as one of the original racehorses. Fittingly, such a legendary horse truly moulded his legacy upon the same streets of my grandfather, the same town he met my mother's mother. As said thoroughbred stormed through his career, Grandad built his own legacy in concrete. Constructing bridge after bridge, pride festered en masse with each structure he raised – the most local sits in ink above my elbow. Every which way, his memory stings bittersweet as we work to commemorate him in ways he will never see. We ritualistically wait until death to appreciate the life and never learn in doing so.

Today, the man he was is reduced to passing portraits of the mind: jockey profiles in the *Racing Post*. The snake tattoo atop his forearm that was only ever a trodden-on worm in my lifetime, engraved when he was thirteen. His lessons in picking one nostril with two fingers and my (now permanently) stretched nose. The whisky and red, white with mussels and only Chablis on Christmas Day. His accent on fil-em because there was simply not enough enunciation in film. The oil painting strapped on the chimney breast, which we would spend many evenings sketching together. A painting now replaced by another of his bridge. Poirot, Morse, and Vera. A Tuc biscuit and a slice of whichever cheese Grandma had bought that week. A mouth that housed only two front teeth,

then just one as I entered my teenage years and none by the time he died. My next-door neighbour until he one day stopped inhabiting that house.

Odds were lowered by his unique sense of complete authority yet a worrisome disregard for health and safety. Stories of a December fire that crackled like popping candy, flaking embers that burnt cinnamon and flickered orange all the same – a home torched by a forgotten cigarette. This memory framed again by festive wishes and carols, is recalled by my mother in her adolescence. Grandad melted into an armchair, one of tens that had perched in that room. Each seat adorned a reclining footrest and sat as a cornerstone for such a patriarch. With neither him nor the armchair left, the room's walls reverberated a profound sense of desolation. That was until my grandmother placed her chair there in its absence. Her doing so felt like cleaning a wound with sugar rather than salt, like your mother wrapping a plaster over a papercut and kissing it better. It was in said chair that Grandad, nursed to sleep by his whisky, relaxed his fingers and released the cigarette he had smoked while nodding off. It engulfed his wife's new living room suite in flames. By all accounts he was still in a sleepy, half-cut state as the firefighters fought to awaken him and extinguish the flames.

Like a horse in his pasture, my grandfather never strayed far from his beloved social club, one I still tip my head to as I pass homeward bound.

'Hi Grandad,' and he'll never reply, but my ten-year-old eyes still see him beneath the window, briefcase by his side.

We bought him a whisky the Christmas just passed. It was the finest we could find and I knew he would be remarkably impressed, perhaps begrudged that we never splashed out as much when he was here. I wonder when it will be opened – if my brother

ever gets a girlfriend or miraculously remembers to put deodorant on in the morning. Until then it sits proud in his room, a manifestation of celebrations to come, a promise that he will be there to celebrate too, when it is finally tasted. As grandads go, he truly was as grand as they come and though I will not see him physically again, his love adorns my arms in the way of my moles and my terribly fabulous hair.

As any winning horse does, they pass the post and the race ends. Or with a lame limp, the last crack of the whip resounds and the unlucky are taken around the back and shot. Such acute grief left me considering how *unlucky* it is to live, for to live is to die – a system built to disappoint. My misery is nursed by memory, and what marvellous ones I have. In the context of his timing and those of us left behind, he finished first. Perhaps his greatest legacy, he won the race that most intend to fall back in. We never went without and with a legacy so profound, I doubt we ever will in his absence either.

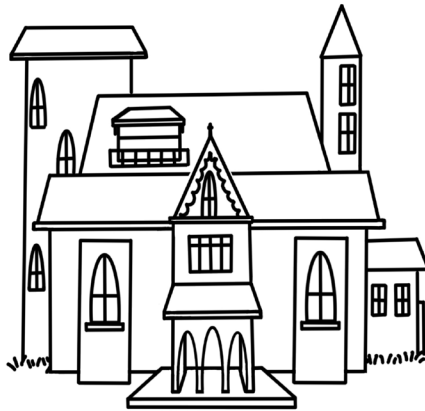
Peter Doyle: horse race enthusiast, whisky connoisseur, and my incredibly special grandad.

The Murmers of Barbary Manor

Aimie Cayless

Aimie Cayless is an award-winning poet from Hinckley. She is preparing to take on her MA in Lincoln after a successful three years on the undergrad. Her work has been published in the Quasar anthology within Writing East Midlands. Also, she loves to discuss anything and everything “The Hunger Games”.

Content warnings: Gore, death.



Jasmine hears murmurs. 'Get out.' She puts them down to conversations in her head.

'Nathan?' she whispers. Paranoia rattles around her skull, bouncing off every idea that comes to mind. I can't leave, what if they catch me? Two open doors beckon her; she can't stay in the vestibule. Each door has the same eccentric pattern; green, brown, and orange stripes. On the letterbox in front of her a plaque reads 'Barbary Manor.' Jasmine closes the door behind her, telling herself that the cold is causing her goosebumps. Out of habit, Jasmine shuffles her feet onto the welcome mat. She looks down at where she's standing. 'Welcome me.' The 'e' and 'o' have been worn away. They can't be that bad, she thinks, as if cleanliness is the ultimate judge of character. The doormat gives her a sense of belonging; her mother preaches that a dirt-free house is a spirit-free house. Jasmine looks for somewhere to place her tote bag which is sawing at her collarbone. She sets it down at the entrance to the vestibule.

'Up here,' Nathan's hoarse voice calls out. His figure rests at the top of the stairs.

Her feet feel sewn into the wooden floorboards. Lifting her right foot up, she sees needles pinging across the room as the stitches wrapped around her shoes come loose. One of the needles pings into her eye and she squints. The metal is cold on her eyelids as she blinks, so she takes out the needle with her eyeball still attached like cheese on a cocktail stick. She places her eye in her pocket, taking no notice of the pain. Having grown up with contacts, she treats the removal of her eye like it's her bedtime routine. She remembers an anecdote from her uncle; his eye popped out

after sneezing once and he had to put it back in himself. Jasmine thinks that he can sort her out at family dinner next week.

With one eye she can see the stairs are in front of her and there is a crusty oak door to her left.

‘Come on,’ Nathan says, exaggerating the final syllable as a child would to their mother. Jasmine takes the door to her left, leaving it open for Nathan.

The light level is enough for her eye to eventually adjust, but the rumours of drug-fuelled squatters encourages her to take out her phone. A message from Nathan one minute ago reads ‘where u go?’ Jasmine swipes the message off her screen and turns on her phone torch. It is a poor-quality light source, but Jasmine and Nathan didn’t think to steal a better one at the last house – not in their rush to get away.

Jasmine’s face is lit up by her screensaver. Freckles puncture her face, giving her a natural contour on her nose and cheeks. There is a sickly Victorian glow which taints her olive skin. Her hair is tangled from running in torrential rain without a hair tie, but it doesn’t look out of place with her appearance.

Jasmine points her torch at the glass cupboard as she has done in several houses today. Halloween: the day people are most welcoming to strangers in their house. Jasmine knocks on the glass. ‘Trick or treat.’ Fine china scratches the glass, pushing on the cupboard in a poor escape attempt. Broken plates are worth nothing, but the sharp porcelain edges call to Jasmine. ‘Place me on your skin.’ She turns around, seeking out her tote bag. She didn’t think there would be anything worth stealing here, but Nathan rightly disagreed earlier in the day.

The oak door is closed. Jasmine’s torch circles the hinges and the frame. She didn’t hear a slam, or Nathan’s feet stomping down

the stairs.

‘Nathan?’ she whisper-shouts. ‘I wanted to keep this open.’ Jasmine exhales through her nose and rolls her eyes.

Floorboards creak. Behind you.

The murmurs crawl out of her head and settle behind her. She doesn’t turn around. Behind us.

Her skin goes cold. Don’t blink. She digs her nails into her palms hard enough to draw blood. She listens.

Jasmine stares at the closed door and sees it topple down onto her skull with aggression and purpose. Crushing sensations invade her body. Splinters spread over her like a porcupine. Jasmine doubles over. Her knees kiss the ground as her legs give way. She looks up. The door is intact; Jasmine notes the smoothness of the wood, as if her skin has sanded it down. Her body aches. Her already skewed vision starts to spin.

Behind me. She thinks back to her encounter with Nathan at the stairs.

‘Look what I found,’ Nathan says. Jasmine stands up and turns around to see him stood two feet behind her holding a bong. He doesn’t have a torch. She catches her balance as her legs nearly give way again. Nathan leans on the glass cupboard, staring out the window to his left.

‘It looks used.’ Jasmine takes a wobbly step back.

‘I doubt it was there for decoration.’

‘Put it in my bag and let’s go.’ Jasmine turns around, desperate to leave. Her shaking hands twist the doorknob open. She considers telling Nathan about her experiences but she knows that he would never believe her. In the first house they broke into, she swore she saw a ghost; Nathan has been teasing her about it ever since.

‘We haven’t explored upstairs together yet,’ he says, walking through the oak door. He drops the bong on top of Jasmine’s tote bag and heads upstairs.

Jasmine has never been tempted by drugs; her mum says it is dirty, and Jasmine has always been clean. She hides under a table, watching the drug-fuelled squatters consume dirt. The table is three feet long, and tall enough for Jasmine to fit with her head in between her legs.

I should have turned myself in, she thinks.

Heavy-footed steps shake the house and Jasmine knows it is Nathan coming into view. Obscured by her hair and lack of an eye, Jasmine’s vision reveals bodies sprawled around the room. Some move but some look ready to be buried with how still they lie. Three bongs are sat to attention and at the service of one woman with short blonde hair. The woman taps on the glass with her jagged nails, smiling at Nathan, then at the bongs, and back to Nathan. Nathan sits with her, joining the bodies. The floor is coated in a thick black grime and Jasmine wonders why their cleanliness leaves them at the doormat. I’m sorry, mum, she thinks, and crawls out from underneath the table. She leaves her tote bag but not without grabbing her stolen bong first. The path of least resistance – and least needles – requires crawling over two buriable bodies. I’m glad I’m not wearing a skirt, she thinks as the bodies’ eyes follow her. Unfamiliar with the mould and mildew, Jasmine gags.

‘Klepto,’ says the blonde woman as Jasmine places her stolen bong next to the others.

‘Nathan, you know that’s –’

‘Don’t be a twat,’ he says and takes a hit of the bong. Jasmine

holds her breath; she doesn't want to inhale second-hand smoke. Coming up for air, Nathan gets half a second to breathe before the blonde woman places a water bottle in his hand. He is fixated on the woman.

'Trust me,' she says.

As Nathan goes for a second hit, Jasmine hears a crack. She looks up and the ceiling is growing veins. They twist like a maze and bulge out four inches long. The veins bleed and droplets smack down onto her forehead, dripping down her face like tears. She licks them off her lips as they travel down. She doesn't mind the taste. Nathan takes a third hit. The veins start to crumble, falling off in small chunks. Collapsing debris hits the ground, narrowly missing the bodies. Jasmine screams. Her mouth fills with blood. She chokes on a clot. It slides down her throat.

Another scream sounds like a gargle. Nathan coughs. Half of the ceiling gives way like a water balloon, splattering blood across the bodies. Nathan and the blonde woman snap out of their trance and become alert. The blonde woman lies on her back and submits to the ceiling. Nathan grabs Jasmine's wrist. They climb over the bodies which are no longer following Jasmine's movement. They both look back before descending the stairs. The blonde woman is finely chopped into thirds, as if a butcher did it personally.

They run down the stairs. Blood trickles down alongside them.

'What the fuck was that?'

'We need to go.'

'But do you see this shit?' Nathan says, wafting his arms toward the ground. Blood congeals around their feet.

Nathan battles the door to the vestibule, pushing when it is a pull. Jasmine shoves him to the side and opens the first door. He falls, coating himself in layers of blood. Jasmine wonders who the

blood belonged to. With no attempt to stand back up, he crawls into the vestibule and tries to open the next door.

‘It’s locked.’

She looks at Nathan with wide eyes and an open mouth. Sobbing, she bangs on the front door but her body is too weak to exert that much force.

Murmurs circle around Jasmine’s head. ‘No trespassers.’

After twenty minutes of searching the house, Jasmine and Nathan reconvene. They are both smeared with blood clots and droplets of sweat. ‘There’s no way out,’ Jasmine says. Nathan punches the wall next to the glass cupboard.

‘Have you looked for a garden?’

‘I said there’s no way out,’ she shouts. The blood has risen to their ankles.

Nathan looks at Jasmine. His face contorts and he throws up.

‘Where is your eye?’ he says after wiping residue sick onto his jeans. Jasmine reaches into her pocket and holds her stabbed eye in the palm of her hand.

‘I can’t believe you have only just noticed.’ Jasmine can believe it but saying this wins the argument that she knows will ensue. She furrows her eyebrows at his lack of empathy.

‘When did this happen? Why didn’t you tell me?’

‘I –’

‘How did it even happen?’

‘Well –’

‘Is that a needle?’

Jasmine swivels to storm out and hits her nose with such force that her freckles imprint the wall. She looks at the room surrounding her. The walls are closing in, drawing closer to their bod-

ies. Nathan notices a second later and stands in the middle of the room, avoiding the crushing walls coming his way. 'Above us,' the voices murmur to Jasmine. She looks up and the ceiling is coming down too. It moves faster than the walls. Nathan pulls Jasmine into the middle of the room. He envelops her body with his own.

'Nathan, look up.' Her voice is encompassed in worry.

The ceiling juts down.

Nathan's face is punched by the ceiling. He falls to the ground, limp. With one eye she squints, gaining a better look at his injuries. Bodily fluids crawl out of each orifice, joining the blood pooled around them.

Jasmine takes off his top and begins chest compressions. At the sixth compression, her hands fall through his chest like he's made of glass. His rib cage caves in, melting into his organs. Her hands are stained. Craving to be clean, she wipes them on Nathan's jeans. She avoids the sick stains.

'You're alive,' she says but he doesn't breathe.

The walls and ceiling have stopped moving.

Adrenaline creeps into her bloodstream. Jasmine yanks his body. She grips onto his wrists and pulls him out of the room through the oak door. Blood and skin tissue swish out of his gaping chest cavity.

'You're okay,' she says. Dragging Nathan into the vestibule, Jasmine sees that the front door is open wide. She hears the murmurs again. 'Leave Barbary Manor.'

The Many Misconceptions of an Imp

Emily Hyndman

Emily Hyndman is a writer and veil poi artist from Cambridgeshire. After a decade confined by chronic illness, she's now in recovery, exploring the world and writing fiction. She loves storytelling in all its forms. Her work is published in *Ingenook*, *The Hemlock Journal*, *FLARE* magazine and other esteemed publications.



Psst. You. Down there. The one with wandering eyes and a dash more imagination than the rest. I'm here, can't you see? Up high, north side of the Angel Choir, one leg crossed over the other. Sometimes I'm mistaken for an elf. I'm thinking that's the ears; they're a little pointy. But I'm clearly an imp. An old imp. A legendary imp. An imp with the wild wind of mischief swirling inside my stoney exterior. I'm full of chaos, but not only chaos. There's depth to me, you see.

Oh good! You spotted me. I know, my mouth isn't moving. I'm frozen on the outside, truly turned to stone, but inside I can assure you I'm quite as alive as you are. Humour me a rant, will you? For there are many misconceptions about imps, and as one of great authority myself, I think we ought to discuss them. Don't worry, the other visitors won't bother us mid-talk. Many a folk come inside the cathedral to stare at me, to point at my big wonky teeth, my little horns, my bowl-cut furry fringe. But I seldom talk to them; I'll simply give them what they want. Which, let's face it, is a stone face staring with blank eyes, a grotesque little gargoyle and nothing more. I only whisper to the visitors I can sense came here for a little magic. And that's you, isn't it? I think that's you.

My furry fringe was not cut in a bowl: that's the first misconception I'd like to debunk. Imps have no need of bowls, as our food can be eaten straight from the stem. Imps eat flowers, you see. None are poisonous to us. We can chomp on a buttercup all day and never get an upset stomach. We'll have foxgloves for an entrée and never break out in a rash, and stinging nettles for desert without ever getting stung. This contributes to our unpopularity, especially in spring. I'm sure you see why. A cluster of friendly imps can easily decimate a garden in full bloom within the hour,

then move onto next door's soon as dinner time comes.

We often blame this on rabbits. That's not very nice of us. But I can assure you, most of the time, we are nice folk: that's another misconception. That we are nothing but mischief makers. Worse than pixies, even, because at least pixies are cute. We're quite low on the pecking order, I'd say. If fairies are beloved by all, elves by some, pixies by few and gnomes by the occasional old lady with an excess of lawn décor, then imps are well-liked by very few indeed.

No, please don't disagree. I know you have a kind heart but lying to make me feel better won't work. I'm too old for sweet-talking. Too old for flattery. I listen up here. I've heard so many things I'd rather not have. I know so much of your modern world from this little northern nook of stone, yet I've never seen it with my own eyes. It makes an imp cynical. Hearing how humanity has changed and how it hasn't. Hearing how you lie to yourselves and to each other. And not about such noble things as making an old stone imp feel better about his place on the pecking order, but about things that matter, about the state of the earth you call home.

That's a nice segue into our next misconception: imps don't care about humans. Some will say we treat you as playthings and nothing more, that we have our own societies to care about, our own impish ways to concern our days. But we do care. It's important that you, as someone with wandering eyes and a dash more imagination than most, know this. If I were to write a pecking order in reverse, from the point of view of the imp rather than the human, I'd place humans very high indeed. You're possibly number one for us (although imps do have a fondness for gremlins and we're often seen cavorting with bridge trolls), because you're so entertaining. No really, you are. And when a creature is as fascinating as you, naturally care will sprout from that. How could

we spend so many countless days observing your peculiar habits, the arbitrary wants and desires of man, the bizarre things you find important, and not start to deeply care?

Alright, okay. I hear you're wanting to address the elephant in the room. We do play tricks, don't we? That's not a misconception, I hear you say: imps *are* mischievous, and they are, if you're not mistaken, associated with the devil, which makes all this sentimentality a little hard to swallow. Yes, I've heard you, my dear wandering eyed friend. We have been known to play a trick or two, switch a baby or five, and occasionally attend the dinner party or graduation of a witch, warlock, demon or ten. The average imp is rather lonely, and we're not picky with whom we associate.

I'm not making excuses. We're simply not judgemental folk. We're curious – often far too curious for our own good – and we like to muscle into the business of other creatures just as much as we like to muscle into the business of our own. Business muscling helps quell loneliness, because it's so distracting that you forget yourself in the process. An imp can get so caught up in another's life, whether they're a witch, warlock, fairy or human, that they can start to lose their sense of self, which for you possibly sounds absurd but for an imp is perfectly rational. We don't have dreams or goals, not like humans do. It's not that we're purposeless, but we're not so purposeful either. Even the human idea of needing to have a purpose, and for that purpose to be so tied to who you are as a person, is very hard for us to get our impish heads around.

Imps like to be. We live in the moment. We like to run on the wind and dance on the spires of very tall buildings and speak with any creature whose wandering eyes wander our way. We like chaos because it's unpredictable and more fun can be had when you don't know what will occur. We're not planners, and we're certain-

ly not Machiavellian in our mischief. And yes, perhaps we do on occasion, get swept away in our own selfish joy. But mostly we're selfless about our fun. We spread it because we care. We want you to have fun too.

What's that you say? *Am I happy?* What an odd thing to ask. It never ceases to surprise me, how those huge brains of yours work. Hm. Let me think. I want to give you an exacting answer because an approximate one won't do. I'm an imp, alive inside but frozen in stone for seven hundred and sixty two years, entertained by the coming and goings of human folk and occasionally visited by other magical-kin, able to communicate through telepathy, able to talk inside anyone's mind I deem more imaginative than most. What say you then? Do these things constitute a recipe for happiness? I'd say they do. There are only two things I miss: being able to create more chaos than I'm currently able and chomping petals. Other than that, I'm quite content. The angel wouldn't have frozen me so if I were to lead such a bad life up here.

She's one of my visitors, you know. We discuss elfin politics. She tells me that perhaps one day she will free me, but that I'd have to promise not to create the same sort of mischief I was creating before, and we both know I'm not yet capable of doing so. I could lie to her of course, but I don't want to. I have a soft spot for her and as I've already told you: imps are not Machiavellian, and we don't very much like lying for the sake of feelings. She feels guilty for freezing me here – I know she does – and I know it would bring her relief, too, if I told her I'd learned my lesson and would be a very good little imp from now on, but it wouldn't be true and so I don't. I'd be straight up that spire, hacking spit balls down at tourists who would think the hail very strange, then my brother would hop to me over all the rooftops of Lincoln, swirling great gales of

wind as he came, and we'd wreak havoc inside here together, just as we did all those seven hundred and sixty two years ago, breaking windows, playing imp-ball and clogging up the organ pipes.

He's still free, my brother. The angel can't catch him: believe me, she's tried. But he's ever so much quicker than me, so fast he's just a blur on the wind. If you happen across a smudge in the sky, dancing from roof-top to roof-top, especially at dusk, be sure that it is him. You may think it's a bat or a bird late to roost, but it's not I assure you: it's my brother bringing with him great gusts to rustle the trees as if from nowhere. Oh, how he loves the wind!

The last misconception I'd like to share with you is perhaps the most important. It's our story, our legend, my brother's and mine. They've got it wrong in those godforsaken pamphlets. I'd like a good, stern, word with whoever wrote those things. They're always confusing the visitors. I'll hear people reading from them, a gasp with words like 'the devil!' and 'knocking over the Dean!' but we did no such thing. So, before you go, let me right this wrong. Let me tell you how it was, not how they say it was so.

Firstly, the devil did not send us! Whoever told the pamphlet-makers that was terribly misinformed. I have never met the devil myself. Nor has my brother. We've come across a demon or two, and as I've alluded, we've been to several graduations and the occasional wedding of a witch, but the big-man-boss of the underworld?! Dear me, that does seem a stretch, doesn't it? Truth be told, I'm not sure he exists. It's like the thing parents do when they tell their children if they're naughty, they'll find coal in their Christmas stockings rather than presents. The devil, if I'm not misinformed myself, may just be the adult equivalent of the coal in the stockings threat. Be good, for goodness sake, or else such an awful creature with red skin and a fork in his hand will roast you

for all eternity! Seems rather farfetched. Next time a demon happens upon me, I'll have to pick their brains about it. For demons, I imagine this may be a sensitive topic, so I've always avoided it, but as I age, I think perhaps sensitive topics should not be avoided but rather discussed, as I am doing with you.

We came to Lincoln purely by happenstance. After a good leap and bounce on the thatched roofs of Chesterfield, and an afternoon spent twisting the spires of St Mary and All Saints Church, my brother conjured up a particularly gusty wind which blew us all the way here. Up the hill it carried us, along with twigs and little branches and so many fallen leaves we probably resembled a flight of starlings. But we were no murmuration. The cathedral, back then, was the most magical structure we'd ever come across. I'm told there are many like it now, but I can assure you that seven hundred and sixty-two years ago, it was quite unique. The tallest building in the world – that's what a peasant girl said, but I'm not sure whether I believed her. Now I hear it's quite different. You're used to buildings so much taller than this one, with faces of their own, made of stone or glass or anything else you wish. In any case, me and my brother were quite taken with the place. We spent many a week here napping in the organ pipes, blowing out the candles, paddling in the font, and yes – occasionally – smashing the odd window. It was undeliberate, of course. I wouldn't recommend playing imp-ball near any glass objects, never mind with a brother whose aim is as unpredictable as his weather control.

Now, did we knock over the Dean? Yes and no. A better question might be: did we intend to knock over the Dean and was the Dean hurt from his fall and did he scold us or tell us to leave? In which case the answers are no, no, yes and possibly, yes.

We were playing a game of imp-ball. The rules are very com-

plicated, too complex for the average human brain, I'm sure, even one so imaginatively gifted as yourself. It was half-time, but our half-times are not breaks. Oh no, they are simply a time in the game when time moves in half-seconds, and whatever move you play, you must play half of it, with half your body and half your mind, which can be very tricky business. My brother was throwing the ball at half speed, with half-might, at half-time, with half an eye closed, taking in half a breath. It was a very tense moment in the game, as I'm sure you can imagine. He chucked the ball just as the Dean entered through the great wide doors, and it hit the poor man right between the eyes, knocking him down, and out, for a good thirty seconds. The peasant girl I mentioned earlier helped him come to with some smelling salts, and though dozy, he wasn't seriously hurt. A bruise bubbled up between his eyes hours later and perhaps it was not right for me or my brother to laugh, because the Dean became very angry indeed, scolded us, told us we were naughty and terrible creatures, and that if we didn't leave of our own volition, he'd send an angel upon us who would punish us so.

I'm sure you can predict what happened next. We did not leave. We continued our mischief-making mayhem, continued our games of imp-ball, continued our laughter and smashing of windows, continued our fun. When she came, we weren't very bothered. She's a gentle one you see, gentle in voice, in word, in mannerism. She warned us, but we thought nothing of her warnings. She told us what she would be forced to do if we did not stop our antics, and we laughed, because she was so very stern and sternness can be so very funny on a creature such as she.

I was perched above the angel choir, one of my legs crossed over the other just as it is right now, when she waved a hand and

turned me into stone. I was not throwing a rock at her, like the pamphlets would have you believe – I was simply sitting and laughing with my big goofy teeth on show, telling her, quite honestly, that we would not be stopping our mischief making any time soon. I'm not sure why she took that moment as the moment to give up on me. She'd been with us all day by then, persuading us, wooing us, telling us that there was more fun to be had elsewhere, or even outside, where the Dean was not in danger of any more bruises and the windows were not so precious as these. But give up on me, she did. And with that wave of her hand, I was frozen. And speak we still did: me, telepathically, and she, with her gentle words.

My brother, being far quicker than I, then fled through one of the cracks in the broken glass. Off he was on a nippy, sprightly breeze, carrying him straight through the peasant girl's home, ruffling her linens, extinguishing her hearth, and spooking her chickens in the process. My brother's still about. He visits often, but he knows not to stay around too long in case the angel comes back and carries out her punishment on him, too. Though I doubt she would. All she wanted was for us to make our mischief elsewhere, and surely that's what he's already doing. His chaos reigns outside, in the town, where gusts of wind appear from nowhere, the weather changing all of a sudden; but you're safe if you come in the cathedral, and that's all she wanted, really. A place safe from the elements and from the chaos. A place of peace, that's what she tells me. Of tranquillity and quiet and stone.

You'll be on your way now, I'm sure. Places to be, people to see. You're not like me. You're the visitor, not the visitee. And to live you must be out there, making your ambitions and dreams and all those strange things humans desire so desperately, come true. I hope you will take these misconceptions to heart. I hope

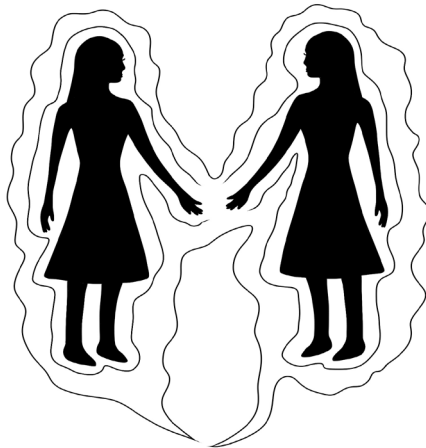
you will remember my debunking of them, and I hope next time an imp creates chaos in your life, you won't dislike it so. Embrace the madness and the mischief! But know there will always be a place of quiet if you need it, where a little imp sits above the Angel Choir, one leg crossed over the other, wonky toothed, and very much alive.

The Missing Girls

Ellie Burton

Ellie Burton is an English writer studying Creative Writing at the University of Lincoln. She is an avid reader who enjoys both reading and writing gothic and psychological stories. When not writing, Ellie can be found at live music events or shopping.

Content warnings: Mention of stillbirth, gruesome imagery, suicide.



Travellers stumbled across here, and explorers searched for safety, almost as often as the rain poured. There was a large house just over the field, dark and daunting, just visible from here on a clear day. Claims were often made that someone lived in the abandonment. Footsteps could be heard. The creaking of a door. Whispers for help.

No one knew for certain what or who was making the noises, but many hypothesised that it was the remnants of a girl who lived around here, many moons ago. Visitors were always anxious about what they heard, desperate to help the whispers. They would come here and ask about her, and I would always tell them the tragic tale of the two sisters.

It had been the start of a winter's day. Morning's orange rays spilled into the white room, waking Ivy. She rose to say her usual prayer for a good day, but, instead, found her sister, Amber, missing from the bed beside her.

Dashing downstairs, she found her father already awake, sharpening his axe. Still no sign of Amber anywhere in the house, nor outside. She looked beyond their garden walls. Mist sat above the miles of fields, making it hard to see. There was no disturbance to the frost-covered grass, and the gate to the garden remained locked, something Amber always forgot to do when she went exploring the moors.

Ivy rushed back inside to her father. 'Have you seen Amber?'

'No, dear.' He continued to sharpen his axe, looking up only because of Ivy's lack of response. A fearful expression took over his face and he asked, 'Are you well?'

'No. She wasn't in bed when I awoke, and she has never risen

before me. She is neither in the garden nor the house.'

'Calm down, dear. She has perhaps gone for a morning stroll.'

Her thoughts raced over his suggestion, and she started collecting firewood from the shed outside. Her father's teeth were chattering and his hands were shaking. Ivy and Amber never seemed to suffer from the cold, but Ivy always tried to keep their father warm.

She looked back at the closed gate and attempted to see beyond the thick fog for her sister's figure.

'Dear?' her father called, interrupting her thoughts. 'Can you prepare the cart? I am going out today to gather more wood.'

Ivy took two carrots from the vegetable box and fed them to the two horses they owned before reining them up, ready for her father's day. He joined her moments later, placing his axe in the cart, and then climbing up to head off with a quick goodbye.

Ivy waved him off before heading back indoors to await Amber's return. Hours passed with no sign of her sister. Ivy looked out of the window toward the setting sun. A pink blanket stretched across the sky and a silver ball sat low in front of her. The winter night was setting, and no one wanted to be around to experience it, for it was not probable they would return. The evening cold took many, as her father often told her.

Her heartbeat increased, and, for a second, she feared Amber had run away, as she often threatened. She once told Ivy that someone was after their father for what he had done. That's why they had to move to the middle of the moors. But Ivy did not believe she would do that to her.

Ivy rushed upstairs and picked up Amber's diary in the hope that it would ease her mind. She flicked through the pages but only came to yester-night's entry.

There is someone standing in the fields. I can see their silhouette in the moonlight. I cannot tell if they're looking towards us, but they do not move for the entire time I watch them. I fear my worst dreams are coming true, and that father's past is catching up to him. We will suffer for what he did before. I am sure of it. The men from Haworth are still after him.

Ivy read the scribbled words three times over before rummaging through the rest of the pages. The men had watched their old house, and after three days, their father had invited them in. Amber did not record why, but she did note that their father had announced their move the following day.

Ivy stood and looked out of the window with the diary entry fresh in mind. The mist had settled, and just beyond the outline of the abandoned house was visible on the horizon. Running downstairs, she shoved her feet into her boots and headed towards the house.

Her eyes searched for another person around her as she walked, hoping it would be her sister, yet there was no sign of any other wanderer.

Her boots sank into the marsh-like fields, mud covering her ankles and the hem of her dress. A strong breeze knotted her hair and stung her eyes, yet the cold left her unaffected. Nonetheless, she picked up the pace. She knew Amber had not visited a friend, for they lived too far away since their move. Something in her mind was telling her that Amber was in the house, which was slowly becoming larger in her view, the fear inside her growing with it.

Amber had always been the adventurous one. Ivy preferred to stay home, surrounded by familiarity. Yet, when she thought of home, the comfort had disappeared due to the fear of returning alone.

Soon enough, she was stood in front of the house; its dark,

stained stone, decorated with vines, loomed over Ivy. A murder of crows cawed atop the roof, stalking her every move. It left the same icy feeling in her tingling fingers and rising bile in her throat as it had the first time she had looked at it. She watched the vines, scared to look away for many minutes, and when she did, something dropped in front of her. Her body jolted back as she tried to identify it, but as no light came from any of the five windows, she could not see what it was. She would never understand how Amber, ever curious, could be intrigued by something so horrifying, something so out of place.

Ivy passed through the gate and faced the tall black door at the centre of the house. Her feet pulled her towards it. Hand out, she found the door unlocked and opened it to a dark emptiness.

‘Amber?’ she called out, hoping for a response. She waited by the door, allowing the silence to take over, praying it would soon be broken by another voice.

The small amount of light left from the evening snuck through, casting shadows across the room. Ivy could make out a stairway to her left, straight and narrow, unlike their cottage’s curved one.

‘Amber!’ she called again. Yet there was no reply. She looked around and noticed two passageways: one to her immediate left, just before the staircase, and one to the far right.

It was clear to Ivy that she would receive no response. The silence became more dreadful, and she knew it was time to leave.

Perhaps, she thought, Amber had already returned home and was waiting for her there, having unknowingly passed one another. Thinking it plausible and a better explanation than her being here, Ivy turned, itching to leave, when the door slammed shut.

A yelp filled the air as Ivy jumped backwards in shock. The scratching sound of a match followed, and light filled the room.

Ivy screamed.

A large wooden torch was held by a disfigured being obstructing the doorway. Ivy stared at its discoloured face, accentuated by stitches around its eyes keeping the lids from dropping, allowing a full view of the black veins decorating the ball, and ears of a pale white.

Its mouth and cheeks were stiff, but Ivy could feel the smile they were trying to create. It eyed her with pride. She stepped backwards, but she hit something, preventing her movement – something that wasn't there before.

The creature grimaced, its front brown teeth visible through a little gap, and it looked over Ivy's head. She turned, her movements slow and her breathing steady, radiating a calmness which her mind did not feel.

A torso in a black coat stood behind her, blinding her from viewing the room. She looked up. The man looked as normal as her father did. Kinder. His eyes were of the same hazel colour which Amber used to describe Ivy's, and they appeared to glow when paired with the joyous smile on his lips, nothing like the attempted smile the creature made. His arms flinched by his sides. She noticed and stared at them, thinking he was about to hit or grab her, but the thought vanished when she looked back at his face. Tears had formed in his squinted eyes, smiling still.

Ivy was torn between running away from the two figures and asking the kinder-looking human for help. But deep within, she knew that the man would do no such thing, for he was with the creature. Her head moved from side to side, trying to find a way around them. She turned back to face the creature, whose confidence told her she had no way out.

'Hello, Ivy,' it spoke in a raspy voice, scratching her ears,

threatening to draw blood. ‘Or should I say “sister”?’

Ivy choked and shook her head. Bile rose up her throat. That couldn’t be Amber, she thought.

‘I recently met our other sister. Amber? She was a delight.’

A wave of relief ran down her spine to know it wasn’t Amber but tensed when she realised that the creature had seen Amber, and she hadn’t heard from her all day.

‘Where is she?’ Ivy demanded, swallowing hard. But the creature only chuckled.

‘Somewhere... other. I need not know; the real prize is right in front of me.’

Ivy’s brows furrowed together, and she turned to face the normal-looking human behind her. His previous smile had disappeared, and his eyes held a warning aimed at his companion.

‘You see,’ the creature continued, ‘I knew your *father*.’ Ivy, facing the creature again, could feel the man behind her tense.

‘Where is my sister?’

‘She is safe,’ the creature replied. Its nose crinkled in disgust. ‘You may see her, should you do as I say. For I see you as my sister, but also as my enemy. Your father is mine, and, by father, I mean maker. A secret has been hidden from you, a secret even your sister had discovered but kept quiet. The man behind you shares your blood, not the man who keeps a roof above your head. You were a stillborn, just like your sister, stolen by the man you name your father and given a new heart which would continue beating. I was the first tested, given a new heart and a new brain, but he was disgusted by me. Amber was next, another practice, made with a bargain. She almost died many times within her first years. By then, he knew what he was doing. And that is how you were made. “God’s gift” he called you. He kept Amber to give you a sister. But me? I

was forgotten and ignored as soon as you took your first breath. And now, you will take me back to him.'

'You speak nonsense and lies. For what reason should you make up such a story? For what reason should you want to scare a young girl?'

'I speak no lies, dear sister. You may ask the father behind you.'

'It is true,' said a deep, regretful voice behind her. Ivy turned to face him, waiting for him to repeat the words to her face. And he did, his face as sad as his voice, and his gaze both embarrassed and hurt. 'I hoped you would not find the truth this way, but there was no other option for me to find you. We tried before, multiple times as you were growing, wishing to see our daughters, but he kept you away from us – as far away as moving to the middle of the moors. For the last three years, we have stopped at nothing to find our sweet daughters.'

'Our?' Ivy repeated. 'We?'

'Yes. You and... Amber. You are not true sisters. You were born from me, and her of my once acquaintance, now friend. Both born still, and both taken and revived by Albert.'

'Enough!' the creature boomed. 'If you wish to see evidence, I shall show you.'

The creature gripped her shoulder and turned her to face it. Ivy stared, unsure what was about to happen and hoping to see something in her periphery to help her get away. If Amber was here, then she needed to find her. But there was only the empty doorway on her right.

The creature caressed her shoulders, dragging its hands down her arms, and she feared it would pull her arm out of the socket. But it didn't. It continued to move with precision towards her

laced up front, pulling on the bow which held it together. The top opened, revealing the corset underneath. It was tied at the back and would require removing the dress to undo it. With a grunt, it ripped the front body of the corset apart and stared at her naked chest.

‘Look at that scar,’ it drooled, trailing a finger along the scar tissue from the middle of her chest, down under her left breast.

Ivy looked down at the scar, tracing it with her own finger. She’d had it for as long as she could remember. Her father had explained that, when she was young, she had tripped and dropped a mug, which had shattered and got stuck in the skin between her ribs. A surgeon had repaired the wound but left the scar.

‘You tell no truths,’ Ivy accused, as she retied the lace, covering herself up. The creature sighed. When it looked away, she ran to her right, through the passageway and found a door. A bang was heard in the background, but she ignored it and passed through, finding another man waiting for her.

He watched her, a sword in his hand, and smiled. On the right side of his face, she could make out a dimple, just like Amber’s. Her thoughts betrayed her for a moment, believing the words of the two strangers. This was the other man they spoke of. Amber’s father.

‘Are you ready to be reunited with Amber?’ His smile turned vengeful and crazy. He held nothing of what the other man did, no calmness or concern for her.

‘Where is she?’

‘Defeat me, and you shall be rewarded with the information.’

The man kicked a sword identical to his own towards her. Ivy picked it up, but it was heavy in her grasp, weighing her down. She hadn’t ever needed to pick up a sword, never mind battle anyone.

She would not win. He was taller, stronger and held the sword in one hand with no struggle.

She turned for the exit, hoping that the other two hadn't followed her in. But the passageway had somehow closed whilst she wasn't looking.

'On the count of three,' the man said. 'One.'

Ivy turned back to face him, his grin stretching from ear to ear. She held her sword up in front of her with both hands, not caring how scared and unprepared she looked to him.

'Two.'

Ivy, called a voice she would recognise anywhere.

Ivy looked around, eager to find where it came from. The man only stared at her, his grin replaced with confusion.

'Three.' It was slower this time, his excitement lost but only for a moment.

The man jumped towards her, sword out, so quick that Ivy could not comprehend what he was about to do. The sword sliced the top layer of skin on her left bicep. She pushed her own sword towards the man, but he dodged her with a condescending chuckle.

Ivy had to think about Amber. She was in the house; she had just called out for her. Desire pushed her to fight harder. But the man struck again, this time cutting the top of her leg. Her mind screamed, but she did not allow it to come out for the man to hear. She had to stay strong. She had to win.

Ivy swallowed past the pain she was beginning to feel, unfamiliar to her, and moved forwards, hitting her sword against his. For a few moments, this was all they did: attack and block. Ivy then spun to the side, brought her sword down from over her head with a strength she didn't know she possessed, and cut the man's hand.

He screamed as he stared at the hand on the floor and the

blood squirting out of his stump. Ivy did not stay to watch him suffer. She saw a door blending into the shadows on the back wall and ran to it, arriving back in the entrance way, just under the stairs. She turned her head towards the entrance, pulling her neck muscles, to confirm the man and the creature were no longer standing there.

‘Amber!’ she shouted.

Amber did not reply.

Ivy bolted up the stairs, opening three doors until she came to a room with the two men she had thought, foolishly, she had lost.

‘Alas, you have missed your opportunity,’ the creature sighed. ‘She has taken her life.’

Ivy looked from the beast to the man claiming to be her father, but his eyes would not meet hers.

‘She would never,’ Ivy denied. ‘What did you do to her?’

‘I did nothing, dear sister. She did it to herself. She has found the peace she always hoped for.’

‘I heard her only moments ago.’

It tilted its head to the side. ‘She is not in here, I am afraid. But she left you a letter. Would you like me to read it?’ The creature picked up a piece of parchment from the windowsill. Ivy wanted to take it for herself, but the creature had already opened it and read aloud:

“My dear Ivy, I am sorry you should have to find out this way, but I have allowed my soul to move on, for it never belonged here. You must know the truth; our father has lied all our lives about us. We were never his children, only his creations. We should never have lived on from the moments of our birth. The gods of nature had a plan for us, and he destroyed it. Therefore, having learnt why I have never loved being on this Earth, I have decided to take

myself out of it. I will see you on the other side, I am sure. You shall only need to find me once your moment has arrived. I love you always, your sister.”

Ivy screamed, horror and denial flooding her system. She wanted to kill the creature for speaking such lies. Her body moved forward, and she attacked. But the other man pulled her away, and the creature, receiving no harm from her hits, passed the letter to Ivy.

When she read it herself, her heart sank deep within her stomach, and she feared it would leave her body altogether. It was indeed Amber’s handwriting.

‘You have forged this. Do not mistake me for a foolish child.’

The creature chuckled. ‘Why would I do such a thing? Besides, my condition prevents me. My hands are unable to hold a pen.’ He held up his hand, attempting to hold an invisible pen, but struggled.

Ivy turned back to the man behind her. ‘Tell me the truth. Where is my sister?’

‘I,’ the man hesitated, ‘do not know where her soul may have moved on to.’

Her mouth opened, releasing a noise which she had never heard before, scratching even her own eardrums as she screamed all the noise from her throat. Amber was gone. The only thing she needed in life was her, and now she had left her. Amber had promised she would never do that; here was the proof that she had broken that promise. Ivy needed to see her again. Needed to confront her for what she had done.

‘Now that we have “God’s gift”,’ the creature spoke to the man, ‘we must start our search. Albert will rue the day he chose to give me life again only to cast me aside.’

‘No,’ the man said.

‘No?’

‘I will not allow you to harm her after sixteen years of searching. You will not take her away from me to use her in some game of revenge.’

The creature stalked towards the man, who held his ground despite the scary monster approaching with a murderous glare. Its hand wrapped around his throat. ‘I should have never trusted your uselessness.’

Ivy ignored them, making her way to the open window, and looked down at the ground. It was just visible in the night. The building was tall, and what looked to be a concrete porch was waiting for her below.

She could hear Amber beckoning her. Desire and hurt forced Ivy onto the ledge, and she pushed herself backwards. The creature appeared in the moment for a second – the last thing she ever saw.

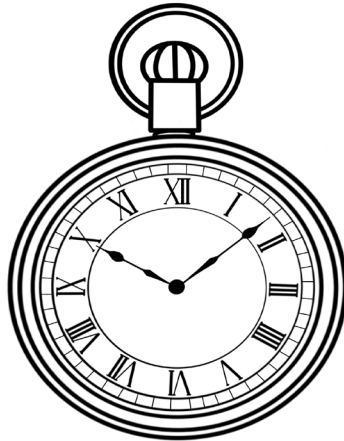
‘Some say she still haunts these moors today, asking wanderers for help finding her sister. Wanderers like you, filling you with fear and urgency, only to lead you to your own death.’ I turned my voice into a whisper. ‘It is rumoured the creature, unable to die, still occupies the house just beyond.’

Overwound

Stacey Mitchell

Stacey Mitchell is a writer based in Shropshire who is studying Creative Writing at the University of Lincoln. She specialises in speculative and surrealist fiction. When she is not writing, she can be found bouncing between projects, reading or practising her circus skills.

Content warnings: Death, attempted suicide, child loss, blood.



11:54:06 – the time life ended.

The wind rushed through my hair as I fell from the sky. The cliff above me became smaller with every second that passed. My eyes closed as my body opened itself to the world. I imagined people's eyes following my body down. The screams of horror echoed in the wind. My body smacked against the beach; the sand cushioned my fall. A shell dug into my lower back. I looked to the sky; grey clouds clustered above me. I had hoped for rain. The world was as quiet as always, nothing but the crashing sea and the sound of my breath could be heard. As I sat up, I groaned at the grains of sand that crawled into the wounds on my feet. A lone seagull cried out. I sat up to look at it, only to find its eyes had already met my own. I gave a short wave. The bird nodded at me and flew away.

The tide washed over me. In its place, driftwood, seaweed and shells rested on the sand. The debris in front of me spelled the word that had cursed my thoughts and turned my dreams into nightmares. Countless centuries had passed where that was the one word I had uttered. That singular word pierced my nerve endings and drowned my brain cells in thought. The word my body used to creak under the pressure of and howl every time I heard it.

Weak.

The holes in my feet resembled the hole in my heart. For they both longed for my wives, my husbands and my children – none of which I could have saved. Aeons of salted tears had stained my skin. Centuries of my screams floated around the atmosphere. My one wish was to watch my children grow and to die before them, not bury them.

Weak.

I thought I was strong once. Memories of formed scars, torn

muscles and the sound of broken bones infiltrated my every waking moment. I turned away from the debris and traced my finger through the wet sand to spell that damned word – a reminder to myself that it is all I am. Limb by limb, I rose. I groaned, placing delicate fingers to my lower back to feel the ridge of that shell. I looked around to find that, once again, no one had seen. My blood-soaked footprints embedded themselves into the sand behind me as I continued down the beach.

Weak.

I have lived too many lives to count. Though, each was as meaningful as they could ever have been. This beach is where it all began. My first love, Eleni. The woman that had the body, mind and soul of the Gods. I worshipped her every movement. I admired every blink she took, every thought, idea and feeling she could muster. My body shuddered at the thought of her. We did not have much, but I would have done anything within my power to make sure she was happy. If she wanted moons, stars, riches... I would have made sure they were in her hands by the end of the day.

My heart longed for Eleni. The last time I saw her was the last time she graced this world with a breath from her lungs, the final breath that helped our daughter come into the world. Our Evangelia. My eyes watered, though I was convinced they had dried out decades ago. I remember the exact time life and death separated my girls. 11:54 pm. I had shed more tears than any river that flowed. Nothing could have prepared me for fatherhood, especially facing it without her. The visions of my love, my Eleni. She had sacrificed her life for our Evangelia. All I could do was mourn.

Weak.

Each night, I pointed to the brightest star in the sky and told

Evangelia all about her mother. As she grew, finding Eleni in them became a habit of ours. We sat on this beach and gazed upon the night sky until we spotted the biggest star – our Eleni, the woman who would have moved planets and galaxies for us. It was my job to make sure she knew that. Eleni's family abandoned us when she passed. They said we were cursed by the Gods. It was us against the world. Each day was as joyous as the last with Evangelia in my life.

Weak.

It was her fifth birthday when it came. She woke up with a fever and a slight cough but was still desperate to go to Eleni's place of rest for a picnic. We had made the food the night before, so I urged her to rest before we went. She pouted and reminded me that her mama had been waiting for a week to see us. So, we went out of the house to the beach, turned left and walked until the lighthouse. When Eleni died, I rested a little cross there in dedication to Eleni. The true whereabouts of her body were unknown to me; her family made sure of that. Evangelia tried to set the blanket on the ground multiple times. Each attempt was not good enough for her, so I helped. We sat and spoke to Eleni about the stars, our meals of that week, anything Evangelia could think of. When she got tired of talking, I told her a few stories about Eleni and I. Evangelia's beautiful emerald eyes sparkled in glee, just like her mother's used to. Though, I grew worried. Evangelia started coughing more as our time with Eleni went on. I asked if she wanted to go. She shook her head and insisted we stayed.

Weak.

Once the evening sky had begun to grace us with its presence, I gathered our belongings and put them in the basket. I tried to stand and grab the blanket, but Evangelia stopped me. She crawled

into my lap and curled herself into me. Her hand looked tiny as it rested in mine. She looked at me; tears streamed down her face. Her eyes had sunken. Her touch was cold. My heart rattled against my ribcage, as it wished to escape. I tried to stand with her in my arms, but she shook her head against my chest and uttered a sentence which haunted me through all this time I was cursed with.

‘Dada, I’m going to see Mama soon.’

I stayed where I was. Her favourite lullaby left my lips as she closed her eyes for the final time.

Weak.

I should have known. I was too enveloped in my grief to see what was right in front of me. My Evangelia, torn from this world too soon. My head raises towards the sky as I watch darkened clouds form above.

Weak.

A single droplet of rain splashes against my nose. One turns into ten, hundreds, thousands even. My body collapses under the pressure of the world. My hands dig deep into the moist sand; clumps bind themselves to my skin. Even the sky weeps in her absence, in my failure.

Weak.

The rain washes away the sand as I think of what time I could have had with my girls. How many sunsets we could have experienced together. What we could have been. During my pitiful lamenting, bolts of lightning clash against the ground, inching towards me with every strike. They leave glass sculptures behind in their place. Amid the chaos, beauty arises.

Weak.

I muster the strength to get on my knees and clasp my hands together, wishing to be greeted by my Eleni, my Evangelia. The

salted wind of the sea invites me in as I hear my fate calling to me. The anticipation causes goosebumps to cover me. The hairs on my arms stand and there is a slight quiver in my knees. My senses are as clear as they can be. My body is ready to invite the final blow.

Weak.

I squeeze my eyes shut and hold my breath, bracing for impact as the lightning strikes. My time here has been long, much longer than an ordinary man. I feel the heat of the strike radiate through my bones, the sound ricochet through my head. The light shines against my eyelids. But no pain comes. The surge did not singe my skin, did not strike me down. My body is not writhing in agony.

Weak.

My eyes peek open, one by one, to find one of the sculptures standing before me. An arrow, pointing north. I clamber to my feet and run with a new-found strength I did not realise I possess. My eyes dart towards every sculpture I pass, each one riddled with arrows which tell me where to go. These sculptures grow taller the longer I run, each as unique as the next. Some are adorned with tiny flowers. One is the shape of a basket. As I keep running, the seagull makes its arrival known. A single squawk. I look over to the sound of the noise. It is perched on one of the sculptures. Though this one is carved out of a set of coffins, each one has an initial carved into it: E.

Weak.

I stop in my tracks to look at the coffins. My hand presses against the first. A dull ache arises in my chest as I kneel to look at the smaller one. A single tear falls from my eye, the first one in decades. My entire world and my greatest failures are right in front of me. So close, and yet, so far from my grasp. I stand, pressing a gentle kiss to both coffins as I do.

Weak.

I turn to walk away. From behind me, I hear a crash, but I know I must not look back. The seagull passes me, squawking along the way. It seems my fate has been decided for me. I pass other sculptures, but I dare not look. In front of me, I see a wall of glass. Whatever the Gods may have planned for me is here.

Weak.

I begin to climb. The glass is cold and is hard to hang onto. I must use what strength I have left. The howling wind and blistering rain makes the glass harder to navigate, but a path of ridges guides me upwards. I know not what the Gods have planned, but I know this must have something to do with it. The same beach, aeons into the future. Maybe they will help me break this curse of mine.

Weak.

Each grip onto a ridge is stronger than the next – not because I do not wish to fall, but because I am curious about what is on the other side. Even if the rest of the beach awaits me and the Gods do not have anything planned, I know that I have had my first different day in aeons. A rare sight. I continue to climb for a few more seconds. My hand grabs at what I thought was the last ridge, only to be the end of the wall.

Weak.

I pull myself up to the wall, finding a statue of a bassinet. It rocks itself, whilst a gentle lullaby flows through the wind. I would know Eleni's voice whether it has been 10 days or a millennium. I look all around, but I see nothing but the seagull in the sky, circling the wall. My mind must be playing tricks on me. I take a deep breath and look to the sea. The drowning never works, but I still enjoy the ocean. At dusk, when the sun kisses the waterline, is

when the sea is best.

Weak.

It reminds me of Eleni. Our time together was short – too short. Though I suppose any time with my Eleni would have been too short, no matter how long we had together. Ten, a hundred, even a thousand years would not have been enough. Her eyes would always light up at the sea – whether we were here, or just at the thought of it. I will never forget that smile, a toothy grin as she tried to remove the hair from her face. The same smile – even the same hair – she passed down to Evangelia.

Weak.

A squawk brings me back to my senses. My head snaps towards the sound, only to find the seagull perched on top of the bassinet. It squawks again, inviting me over. I inch towards it. My morbid curiosity wonders what is inside, though the rest of me is terrified to see what torture will come next. I peek over the edge to see a glint of engraved silver. I grasp onto the edge of the bassinet to stop the cradle from rocking, only to be greeted by a pocket watch.

Weak.

My eyebrows furrow. All of this for a pocket watch? I begin to reach for it, when the engraving catches my eye. It reads '*Hail the Kronos cry.*' The seagull squawks a single time more, then flies towards the cliff. Its silhouette is enhanced by the moonlight. As I wonder how long I have been on this wall, the glass below me begins to crack. I run behind the bassinet, grabbing the pocket watch along the way. The glass shatters at my touch. I look over what remains of the wall to find the sand below beckoning me. My heart races as I run to the edge and jump, clutching the pocket watch against my chest. I turn to face the sky. My back hits the ground and I groan.

Weak.

The seagull circles above, mocking me. I lift the pocket watch to check for any damages. As I turn it to the other side, I see the intricate engraving. Small flowers accompany the letter E. My breath catches in my throat. Only one man I have ever known could possess this pocket watch. I know because he gave it to me.

Weak.

It was when we told Eleni's parents that we were pregnant. I remember Eleni's mother, Helene, was ecstatic to be a grandmother. She held Eleni in her arms and revelled in her glow. They wept together and Helene asked as many questions as she could form in a single breath. Helene placed a hand on Eleni's stomach when she told her she was four months pregnant and that we had baby names in mind. I remember Helene squealed before Eleni's father, Angelos, grabbed me by the shoulder and dragged me into the next room.

Weak.

The room itself was Angelos' study. The books stood on guard in their bookcases, like soldiers off to war. On the shelves, trinkets from all over the world collected dust. Papers were splayed across his desk. He noticed me looking and collected them, before unlocking a cabinet behind him. My eyes darted between his back and the desk, as one paper was left. It was dated; the edges were frayed and a little yellow. Upon another glance, it did not seem to be paper, but was something thicker.

'It is Papyrus, boy. But you should know that it is rather rude to look at another man's personal affairs,' Angelos uttered, before locking the cabinet.

Weak.

He sat in the brown leather-bound chair and muttered to him-

self. His eyes darted around the room. What could he have been looking for? He stopped to look my way before he motioned to the seat before him.

‘Well, sit down then.’

He stood and left the room.

Twisted thoughts echoed inside my head. Was he disappointed that I was the father of his first grandchild? Had he still not accepted me as part of the family? Was he going to kill me? My stomach churned at that last one, but, before I could continue to think of all the ways Angelos could murder me, he re-entered with two glasses and a bottle of red wine in his hand.

Weak.

‘You drink?’

I nodded my head. He nodded in reply before taking his seat in front of me.

‘It’s a dry one. I hope you don’t mind.’

I shook my head as he opened the bottle and poured.

‘If you can find enough words to string a sentence together, tell me what you can taste. There is no need for nerves, boy. I just want to know what your palate can identify.’

My face must have been as red as the wine.

Weak.

Angelos lifted his wine glass and pointed it towards me. He motioned for a toast. I met his glass with mine. A small clink cleared the tension in the air. He smiled to himself as he swirled the glass and lifted it to his nose. I did the same. It was a warm, inviting smell. Hints of spice flooded my senses. I moved my nose away and swirled it again.

‘Cherry?’ I asked.

A slight curve of his lips appeared at that.

I took a sip, as I savoured the rich taste. He was right about it being dry. I let it sit in my mouth for a second longer, before I swallowed it.

‘What did you taste?’

‘Coffee,’ I uttered. I was afraid to get it wrong, but the idea of leaving Angelos’ question unanswered terrified me more.

Angelos was quiet for a moment, before he broke into laughter. He had a unique laugh, low and booming.

‘What else, my boy?’

‘It... it is a little smoky, no?’

Weak.

Angelos grinned wide, his green eyes sparkling with glee.

‘You are correct, my boy! The grape is Mavrotragano. One of the oldest red grapes around these parts. That smoky smell is the soil they are grown in. Santorini and the volcanic soils they have.’

I raised my eyebrow. He looked over to me.

‘Ah, but you probably do not want to hear my ramblings. Your eyes have glazed over already.’

I was astounded. That was the longest conversation we had ever shared.

Weak.

He cleared his throat as he picked up the papyrus and looked at me.

‘Boy, do you know why I was given this name?’

I shook my head. I had only met the man a couple times. I had not thought to question why he was given his name, or why anyone was given their names for that matter.

‘My name was chosen because I am a messenger for the Gods. The titan of time, Kronos, has asked me to deliver a message to you, boy.’

My eyes widened at this name. The titan of time himself had

a message for me? Before I could question this, Angelos took a sip and cleared his throat before he read from the papyrus.

Weak.

“‘If our dear Eleni goes to the sky’,” he began, “‘the universe will cry. Tears will plague the world, not a single dry eye,’” Angelos said, as his eyes darted towards me. I opened my mouth to speak, but he pressed his finger against his lips. His eyes returned to the papyrus. “‘The man shall never return to the underworld, no matter how long he hears the bird cry. For if she dies, he will not pass my test of time.’”

Weak.

He cleared his throat once more, before he continued to sip on his wine. He reached into the desk’s drawer and pulled out a pocket watch. He handed me it to me. I admired its engravings. Small flowers accompanied the letter E.

‘Look after her boy.’ He uttered, as he stood and patted my shoulder.

Weak.

The seagull cries, snapping me back into reality. The sand below me is already soaking up my tears. The man was me. I can never return to the underworld. It is no longer meant for me. I have known this whole time, and yet, have only just realised. All my families were doomed to die, and I am doomed to live. My Eleni. My Evangelia.

Weak.

I force myself to stand. I grip the pocket watch with a white-knuckled hand and walk towards the sea. The fragments of glass slice the sides of my feet, some crushing underneath my step. I can smell the trail of blood that follows me. That scent does not bother me. I am forever haunted by the odour of cherries and

coffee.

Weak.

The sea sloshes around over my feet. Every step I take is haunted with memories of how I let my Eleni die. The pregnancy and the birth were both hard on her. My shoulders are heavy with the weight of the world, akin to the heaviness of the sand that my feet claw through.

‘I killed her. Are you happy now?’ I scream into the sky.

The water is now at my waist. My foot slips from underneath me, but I catch myself and continue to walk into the sea.

She told me to let her go. I was to take care of our Evangelia and make sure she was never forgotten and always loved. I could not even do that.

Weak.

I feel the chill of the sea against my bottom lip. My entire body cowers at the thought of never being able to escape this dreaded world. My fingers have gone numb. Soon, the rest of my body will follow. I will wake up on some beach, harmed, but cursed with life.

She told me to let her go as the bed she lay on turned from white to wine red.

The sea is meeting my nose. I try to close my eyes and wait to wake up somewhere else, but the sunrise greets me. My eyes catch the silhouette of the seagull and I hear its cry, before disappearing in front of my eyes.

A voice echoes in my mind as my body is swept by the water.

Weak.

The Inamorata's Stone

Anne Mariner

Anne Mariner is a Norfolk-based writer, studying at the University of Lincoln with a focus on the romance genre. Coming from a family which encouraged creativity, she spends her time pursuing other creative outlets like crafting and baking.

Content warnings: Violence, blood.



The night was at its crest. Moon and stars performed together to light Eudora's path to escape onto the unmarked ship she had noticed just hours before. The admiral's daughter knew all about those vessels and the scoundrels who manned them.

Pirates. Vile, barely human beings, who pillaged and took all they could. And yet, those were the same men Eudora had to thank for bringing her closer to her great-grandmother's medallion than she had ever gotten before.

There was a tale her mother told her before she fell asleep, of a man and his ship. An honourable man who was part of no fleet. Just himself and his crew, sailing the seas in search of wonders written in a diary passed down from his father and his father before him.

Expansive groves sprouting fruits of eternal life, lagoons bestowing wealth unto any man who bathed in them. Of these wonders, the sailor treasured a rose quartz medallion the most – a gift to bestow upon his adoring wife, Eudora's great-grandmother. In the diary, he called it the Inamorata's Stone. It was said that on his journey home with the jewels, his ship was pillaged by brutal sea scoundrels who stole the man's worldly goods along with his life. And since that day, there was no trace of the necklace or its capturers until she overheard the bumbling buccaneers planning their heist.

Eudora snuck onto the seemingly empty ship, grasping the chance to reclaim her family's heirloom and free herself from the years of idle living that came with being an admiral's daughter. She could feel her heartbeat in the very tips of her fingers as she dipped and weaved behind damp wooden barrels and cargo. She could look past the vile rotting smell just to live the sheer exhilaration of her unknown journey.

Beyond the deck, Eudora found a door bearing no lock. Behind it hid a cabin, chock-full of empty crates, with a single port-hole. It looked like a neglected space, somewhere safe for her to hide until the crew arrived at their destination. From there she assumed she could search the isle faster than drunken, sluggish men and take what was rightfully hers. She would hitch a ride on the same ship to whatever port they wound up at and conveniently drop her father's name to the right person who would be able to get her home unharmed. Perhaps it was naïve of her to believe this would work, but it was the only idea she had.

While drafting her plan, Eudora felt a calloused hand around her wrist, dragging her out of her hiding spot. She stumbled out from behind the crates, exposed by a lamp light.

'What do we have here?' A courteous voice teased, his grip still firm on Eudora. When the young woman looked up, she expected her capturer to bear a leathery, boil-speckled face and yet before her stood a clean-cut man. He was young. Or he at least looked it, and his clothes were neat, buttoned – unlike the men Eudora had witnessed leaving the boat.

'Hm, she must not speak.' The man tilted his head with a sly smile on his face.

'*She* speaks just fine.' Eudora tugged her hand from him, wiping it on her skirt. As couth as the man appeared to be, she was wary of his occupation and the implications alongside it.

'You don't look like you belong on a ship like this, ma'am.' He began to circle Eudora at a slow pace, as if closing in on her like predator to prey. Eudora's hands found their place at her sides with confidence, remembering at a single scream her father's men could come running to save her. She returned the man's smirk.

'You may call me Miss Lawrence. My father is England's most

honourable admiral, and I have boarded this boat to join your excursion.’

A half-laugh half-sigh came from the scoundrel’s mouth. He held a cocky but well-mannered demeanour as he introduced himself. Every word he spoke was like a mockery. ‘Lovely to meet you, Miss Lawrence. My name is Edward, my father was a thieving pirate captain, and *I’m* looking to find a reason not to hand you in to his replacement who just so happens to be coming back any moment now.’

There was hesitation behind Eudora’s doe eyes, uncertain of what she could say to stop Edward from exposing her presence. She could either surrender herself and pray that her family’s staff would come to the rescue, or she could worm her way into gaining his trust. He was young, naïve like herself. Easy to manipulate. If she could just get him to keep her hidden in the cabin until they reached the island, her plans would remain untampered. She had gotten this far; it was worth a try.

‘Spare me a moment to explain myself,’ Eudora pled, ‘I swear my intentions are true.’

Edward stopped pacing and pulled out a singular wooden box and gestured the admiral’s daughter to sit on it whilst he leaned against the door, securing their space. He nodded as confirmation that he was open to hearing her out.

‘I overheard your captain’s plans to visit the Island of Tesoro, is that right?’ Eudora waited for a second nod to confirm her suspicions before continuing. ‘There is something of mine lost on the island. I would like to bring it home.’

‘You say it’s on Tesoro?’

‘Indeed. My great-grandmother’s necklace. A medallion with a rose stone charm. It was stolen from us decades ago.’

Edward pondered a moment, taking in Eudora's confession. How did a young lady such as herself know of the Inamorata's Stone? His rough hands wiped at his chin. The silence ached in the young woman's ears, desperate for a single sign, a glimpse of hope to reclaim the necklace. Edward's response took far too long for her, so she got up from the makeshift seat and approached him with intentional tenderness.

'I would do anything to get it back, Edward.' She tucked her fingers into a fold of his shirt and held on to it with desperation, 'I am lost without that necklace.'

She felt the coarse skin of his palms enclose her hands with a comforting pet, then an arm around her shoulder pulling her into a chaste hug. It was sweet. Unlike anything she would expect from a man of his trade. Without lingering, he took Eudora's shoulders and spoke with conviction.

'I will help you.'

Above, a wave of footsteps bludgeoned against the wooden planks. The crew had returned, and Eudora's safety was at risk. Still, Edward kept his promise to hide her. The crew above them bustled furiously to set sail, and the two unlikely friends shallowed their breaths. Eudora could not get caught, no more than she already had been.

'You can stay here. They almost never check in on me, just shout requests through the door like I'm some sort of scum beneath their boots.'

The new partnership remained masked behind the door, sharing stories from their vastly different lives. Eudora listed activities she was forced to attend from her youth, like her weekly violin lessons and the lectures on her lack of decorum from the admiral. Edward's upbringing was much less structured. His youth was

spent attached to his father's hip, aiding his duties until his father's life was taken by the tide and Edward was demoted to the role of cabin boy. A life of taking orders and being pushed over. Eudora sympathised with the man as his eyes lit up with adoration when he spoke of his father.

'He used to sneak me into excursion plans, the less perilous ones, of course. I was supposed to fill in his boots when he passed, you know.'

'How come you're stuck in here then?'

Edward shrugged and shot a glance to the door as if to check his captain wasn't eavesdropping. He could've been doing any damn thing in that room, and no one would take notice. That still didn't settle the scheming pair.

'Captain Leslie, my father's old first mate...he's a persuasive man,' He perched on one of the empty crates and scratched at his scalp. 'Threatened *anyone* disagreeing with my demotion. I could just tell he had been waiting to strip my title from me the moment my father *fell* overboard.'

'I'm sorry, that must have been hard for you,' Eudora crouched in front of him, placing a cautious hand on his knee. 'Was your father...well, as much as a pirate can be...what I mean to ask—'

'He was a good man. He was fair and caring. There was room for anyone on his crew, no matter the background. He hadn't been born into piracy himself, you see. It wasn't about the loot for him, it was survival – keeping other black sheep like himself alive.'

Eudora listened intently, taking in Edward's pure emotion. Her father had only described pirates as pillaging fools, obsessed with stealing other's valuables. No rhyme or reason. Just the thrill. But the stories Edward told her, the kindness and grace he gave her on their journey only confused her. She felt her set beliefs

swaying as they rode the ocean.

‘How are we going to hide amongst the others?’ Eudora began to think about the task ahead of them. How were the two of them supposed to sneak into the crew’s plans without being found out?

‘As a lowly cabin boy,’ he placed his hand on his heart with false sorrow before continuing, ‘I’m expected to stay boarded and keep an eye on the ship. We’ll simply slip away once they’ve made it into the forest. The cavern hiding the Inamorata’s Stone should be the last stop on their heist. While they’re hitting the other spots we’ll head straight there and back. When they reach it, they’ll assume it’s already been stolen. I may end up the target of their residual anger, but we’ll have the necklace.’

Eudora was reluctant to admit it to herself, but it was becoming more evident if Edward hadn’t caught her, she may not have come this close to reclaiming the medallion. She contemplated what kind of compensation would even cover this level of gratuity. What would a low-level pirate do with money? Would he even be able to appreciate it for what it was?

When she refocused, she found Edward’s eyes lingering on her thought-ridden expression with a subtle smile. If she had met him through her father, she considered the fact that she would pursue him. A man with loyalties, passion. A man quite easy on the eyes.

‘Is it busy in that head of yours, Miss Lawrence?’

‘Do not flatter yourself. I am merely going over our plan. I refuse to fail.’

The nervous and excited energy bouncing between Eudora and Edward kept them quiet for the rest of their journey as they watched the Island of Tesoro grow larger as they drew closer. She could sense the medallion’s proximity, as if connected to it.

The crew were rowdy above, anticipating their looting. Sounds of miscellaneous gizmos scuttled across the deck as they emptied sacks upon sacks of stolen goods. They hollered orders to one another to bring their ship into shore. While the rest of the boat's inhabitants off-loaded onto the island, the two below were touching up their final preparations.

It had been brought to Eudora's attention that manoeuvring on and off the ship, weaving through the grove and chasing back before the others, would be tricky in her current get-up. She hadn't thought at all about the bony corset she'd become so used to wearing. But Edward was right, it was restrictive. She turned her back to the cabin boy and reached to undo the lacing that had been perfected by her ladies back home. Beneath Eudora's corset she wore a simple cream evening frock, and the moment the bodice unclasped from over her dress, Eudora caught up to a breath she realised was missing. Even with her back turned, she could feel Edward's eyes burning into her skin. She didn't need to turn her head to know he had been watching while her fingers worked the corset off and nor could she blame him. She could only imagine the lack of feminine presence, having lived solely amongst men for as long as he had been of conscious mind.

'Must you stare?' She turned to face Edward again.

'They should be far enough by now. Should we get going?' Without addressing her question, he opened the door they had been hidden behind for the past day. Eudora nodded and slipped by him with grace. Stepping out from below the deck felt like breathing in the freshest air known to man. There was a faint sweetness coming from the ocean itself alongside the earthy tone from the sand. The island screamed wealth with its abundant floral displays between lengths of emerald trees.

Edward pulled a tatty cut of parchment from his trousers, showing Eudora his sketch of the captain's map of Tesoro. His pointer finger circled their destination, plotting the walk ahead of them. Words remained unspoken as Eudora's mind was far from Edward on their journey, instead caught on the anticipation of seeing, nay touching, her ancestor's jewel. Even as the rocky cove came into view, Eudora was imagining her father's heart bursting with gratitude as she returned home with the reminder of his beautiful wife.

'You need to be prepared.' Edward interrupted their quiet, 'Once we grab the necklace, we must hurry back. They can't see us.'

Eudora nodded. She hadn't spared much thought for the crew and the threats they posed. While Edward may not have been, Eudora knew the rest of the ship's crew were animals. Bestial and armed. The two of them stood no chance against them.

The entrance to the cove was anything but majestic. Trickle of water and mossy rocks in a clumsy arrangement. The two treasure-seekers struggled over them; their footsteps pushed and the stones screeched against one another. It wasn't dark, but dingy and damp. Edward helped Eudora to walk over the large rocks, guiding her by her hands. She was the first to see the haunting display.

Spotlighted by a crack of the bright outdoors, a skeleton chained to the ceiling confronted Eudora and Edward. It brandished a sword in one hand and around its neck hung something Eudora needed no explanation for. She had never seen her great-grandmother's necklace, only knew her mother's description of it. And there it was. The golden chain, the wiring encapsulating a hefty but polished chunk of rose quartz. She was speechless.

'Miss Lawrence...it's beautiful.' Edward came up behind her, placing a cautious hand on her shoulder. He couldn't read her face

very well. It was hard enough for him to understand women at the best of times. She was smiling without an obvious happiness to it. Her eyes teared up but he wouldn't say she was crying.

In their oblivious, awe-struck state, the pair near missed the sound of rocks crunching behind them. They had company.

'I wondered when your father's disobedience would shine through you, Eddy.'

Edward, by impulse, hooked his arm around Eudora's waist and pulled her behind him. He swung round to greet the voice which echoed against the cavern's walls. When Eudora peeked over the cabin boy's shoulder, the image of their capturer made her shudder.

He was a large man, in height and width, a real wall. His hair, though lacking, was scraggly and crusted as if untouched for decades. Edward's hand left the comforting contact with Eudora and put space between himself and the man before him. This was his captain. Eudora could tell from the heavy clothes that padded him out; the jewelled sword brandished in his hands. She knew from the shift in Edward's gentleness to sheer hatred.

'You don't get to speak about my father.' The cabin boy glanced back to the skeletal figure, 'You lost that right the night you killed him.'

Captain Leslie tutted. 'A dangerous accusation. Are you sure you can handle the consequences, boy?'

The sword that sat with pride in his grasp now met Edward's eyeline. It was a threat. The rest of the crew had followed in after Leslie, pulling their swords from their belts. But their efforts were met with a raised hand from their leader.

'Stand down!' he bellowed, 'This is between me and the boy.'

Edward's eyes shot back to the skeleton before yanking the

sword from its hands. He inched forward, pointing at Captain Leslie. Eudora grew more afraid the further away he stepped, yet her feet stayed planted, unable to follow him.

‘I’ve waited far too long to do this,’ The cabin boy lunged, the two of their blades meeting with a shrill scrape, ‘You never deserved that ship. She never belonged to you!’

It was a highly uncoordinated battle. Leslie, due to his size, had a hard time out-weaving Edward as he was much lighter and faster on his feet. However, his reaction time was more sharp, precise, unlike his younger opponent. The two danced around, striking their cutlasses, but all hits were blocked. The crew made no attempt to aid their captain. If they dared to interfere, they’d be the next victims of Leslie’s blade.

Edward was getting cocky with each swing Captain Leslie missed. He bounced back and forth on his feet as if to taunt the other man. With his newfound confidence, Edward managed a short slice on Leslie’s arm but lost his grip in the process. His blade fell to the ground, landing at the captain’s feet. In an instant, the injured man kicked it away from their battlefield and towards Eudora.

‘Let us applaud the ever-disappointing, bilge-sucking son for tryin’ his damn best, ay?’

The rest of the crew cheered with slimy smiles plastered on their grime-speckled faces. Eudora’s eyes burned into the sword at her feet. Years of her father’s stories on the sea, the pirates he encountered, ran through her mind. His descriptions of their sheer disloyalty reminded her of Edward’s father. The way he was mutinied against just by Leslie’s persuasion. If pirates were as cowardly as the admiral had told her, they feared Captain Leslie would turn on them too, throw them overboard. But if Edward’s father were

to be avenged, would their loyalties fall back to Edward, the righteous leader of their vessel?

When the young woman looked back up, Captain Leslie's cutlass threatened Edward's chest. With his life on the line, the boy still didn't falter, proud of his defiance.

'We're done here,' Leslie addressed his band of brutes, 'Start loading the loot, the stone is mine for the taking.'

The rocks crunched once more, leaving just the three of them in the damp cove. The captain dragged his blade to Edward's chin. His yellow teeth bared, swimming in the glory of having yet another life in his hands.

'It's a shame. The crew, the ship...all just in your grasp and you let it go. All because you were too scared to drive your sword through my chest. Don't you think I deserve it? To die by your sword, like your father did mine?'

Something snapped in Edward. He grabbed the cutlass against his skin, its edge slicing his palm, and pushed the force off himself. Leslie stumbled back. Eudora knew this was her time to act. She scrabbled for the nearby sword and bounded towards her partner. Edward took it from her, leaving a lingering touch on her hand. His blood stained her skin. Leslie had already regained his footing and was swerving around Edward with precision. They taunted back and forth with one another, refusing to take the first jab in case they lost their balance and failed to dodge a follow-up attack. The two of them were smart, conniving.

Eudora hadn't backed down either. If Edward were to fight for her dream, she was going to watch every moment of it. That is what he deserved. The captain took note of the pair's dutiful devotion to one another and abused it.

He lunged for the admiral's daughter, catching her by her

curls. Eudora couldn't fight against the hold clasp ing her to Leslie's core. Not with the sword obscenely close to her chest.

'You're a fool, Edward.'

'Don't.' His voice was deep, threatening. A complete contrast to the voice Eudora had found soothing in the cabin. She tried to swallow down the saliva stuck in her throat but something in her refused. The only thing preventing her breakdown was the unspoken promise on Edward's face. A look that said he'd get her out of this.

He took a weary step forward with his sword lowering, as if to surrender. The closer he got, the tighter Leslie's grip grew on the paralysed woman.

'You can have the necklace,' Edward lied, 'Take it and go. Just leave her out of this.'

Leslie smirked at the pathetic offer: take the necklace he was already going to claim and lose the opportunity to kill Edward with just cause. The traitorous cabin boy had sabotaged an excursion; he had left the ship unattended. Nobody could argue with that. Leslie had every reason to execute the only threat to his position.

Trying to take advantage of Leslie's deliberation of the offer, Edward sprung forward to cut his opponent's hands from his partner. Suspecting the false surrender, the captain dodged the blade and booted Edward to the hard ground with a kick.

The cabin boy heard the stab before anything else. The echoing scream and stuttered breath that fell from Eudora alongside the thud of her body. She slumped down beside him. Then Edward saw it. The blood spreading across her cream frock, the colour draining from her adoring face. The sword in Leslie's hand wore Eudora's blood with triumph.

Edward couldn't attend to her. Not yet. For over her collaps-

ing gasps for air, he heard the captain's heavy footsteps shuffling away as he made an escape, necklace in tow. In a moment of haste, Edward threw his blade at the murderer, right into Captain Leslie's turned back. He too fell to the floor, writhing on the mossy rocks and lost his grip on the Inamorata's stone.

Edward scurried over and drove the sword through his captain's back mercilessly. His trembling hands reclaimed the medalion before he brought himself back to Eudora's side. She was pale now. Tears caught in the corners of her eyes, unable to fall and dampen her cheeks. Her gaze landed on Edward's hands as he undid the clasp of the necklace and fastened it around her neck.

'Beautiful,' he whispered her to sleep.

Elephant Steps

Woody Nelson

Woody Nelson is an English writer, with his main writing genres being horror, fantasy and historical fiction. He is currently studying Creative Writing at the University of Lincoln and has previously been published in *Young Writers* anthologies. When looking for inspiration, Woody spends his time researching obscure events from history.

Content warnings: Gore.



March 12, 2011

The EUUR helicopter left Ljudevit Marusic on the outskirts of the Peklopol Nuclear Energy Plant at 11.28am. As its shape dwindled in the silver sky, he became the only man in a thirty-mile radius. The evacuation zone had been lifted ten years prior but no one returned. Peklopol had become a ghost town. Its tallest apartment blocks glanced over the thicket of *Picea abies* that encircled the plant, watching Ljudevit attempt what no man had done in decades.

Unstrapping the canvas sack from his back, Ljudevit dug through the ensemble technology, withdrew the basic Geiger counter and turned it on.

Click-clickclick-clickclick-click. Twenty-one msv/h.

The counter would max out at twenty-five. He walked closer to the plant. The act proved more difficult than predicted. The suit was too cumbersome to operate with any comfort, its Plexi-glass visor catching the cold sun. Nevertheless, they had insisted on it. He wouldn't have listened if it was just the bureaucrat but when the scientists spoke up too, he had no choice.

Clickclickclickclickclickclickclick. Twenty-five msv/h.

He stopped again and rooted in the sack. The antenna stuck through a jumble of wires, but its base had become a foundation for the bag. Ripping the rest of the gear out first, he took the plinth and dropped it to the grey earth. The manual had come out with the camera and rested open page-down four feet away. It wasn't difficult to decipher. Pull a tab, rotate the antenna, turn a dial – all basic stuff. After giving the connection a moment to warm up, a voice spoke in his helmet.

'Mr Marusic?' Dr. Kukk's voice. 'Do you read us?'

‘Yes, sir.’

‘No need for that,’ the doctor’s voice fizzed. ‘Just doctor is fine.’

‘Yes, doctor.’

‘Have you found the camera?’

Ljudevit took the corrugated black pipe from the ground, turning it in his hands. A thick wire fell out the back, trailing back into the bag.

‘Yep,’ he responded.

‘Please attach that to the mount on your right shoulder.’

Ljudevit obeyed, clicking the pipe along the rail on his suit, ‘Any reason this couldn’t be attached already?’

‘Ease of recovery. Please attach the battery pack to your waist-band and make your way into the plant with the Geiger counter reading a maximum of one hundred micro sieverts per hour.’

Ljudevit fished into the sack, clasping the dull grey box to his hip and removing a second counter, discarding the first back into the bag. He took the remaining strewn wires and chucked them back into the pack before heading forward.

Click...click...click. Twenty-seven msv/h and rising.

Ljudevit split his view between the counter and the environment. The plant was rubble, large to small chunks of granite smattered across the hard-packed ground, dotted by smooth black rocks. Ljudevit aimed his shoulder to a piece.

‘What is this, doctor?’ he asked.

‘Graphite. Please ignore it and continue further into the plant. Do not interact with any other material. Just walk and record. One hundred metres you will find a crevice in the wall, enter it.’

Click-click-click-click. Thirty-five msv/h.

The grass disappeared under more dull rubble; graphite blocks

appeared in greater number. Ljudevit struggled over the broken terrain.

The crevice came into view. A purest-black scar against the structure.

‘Once inside, please search for signs denoting the location of the feedwater cooling system and follow their path. You will find a torchlight in the canvas bag.’

Amidst the discord of wires, Ljudevit found the torchlight. Switching it on, he aimed it to the scar. Still blackness. He entered the abyss.

Click-click-click-clickclick. Thirty-eight msv/h.

Burnt steel pipes seized tar-lacquered brick. A film of stagnant water doused the floor; the nictitating overhead halogens mirrored within. The torch shimmered over the corridor in a pale patina. Ljudevit continued forward. The water pressured against his suit, its chill latching to his feet. Each swash about the floor echoed through the plant. Dush-dush-dush...dush...dusshh...

...kunk...

‘What was that noise?’ Ljudevit asked the doctor, quartering his torch across the shadows.

‘Do not panic. Most likely shifts in the feedwater system. Maintain your course.’

Ljudevit counted each step further. He passed a break in the pipes, a sign above marking *Cooling Pond*. He aimed his light and camera in tandem to it.

‘Anything?’ he asked.

No response, but a shuffling – perhaps – from the microphone.

‘You will find a staircase to the systems another two hundred metres forward, then thirty-five metres left.’

Click-clickclick-click-clickclick. Forty-six msv/h.

Ljudevit obeyed. Ten metres. Twenty metres. Thirty. Thirty-five. Thirty-eight.

Clickclickclick-clickclick-clickclick. Sixty-two msv/h.

‘Just walk.’

Thirty-nine. Forty. Forty-four. Fifty. Sixty. Eighty. One hundred and ten.

‘Slow down, we can’t risk getting still water in the suit.’

Ljudevit stopped counting and slowed down. He had to be aware. Less than one hundred metres to the turning. The pipes disappeared into the wall, and the water receded. The glistening tar dried to a matte umber.

The turning existed as a jagged doorframe; the metal door laid across the corridor at twenty degrees. Ljudevit hauled the sack over first then stepped, keeping care of his suit from rough brick and unfiled metal.

Clickclickclick-clickclickclick. Eighty msv/h.

Thirty-five metres. Another sign. *Levels 0 to -2/Feedwater Cooling System/Cooling Pond Maintenance.*

Broken stairs spiralled ten feet down then vanished in the dark. Ljudevit’s light revealed another twenty feet of steps before the void overwhelmed. The banisters hung off at multiple points. The payout of 12000 euros looked meeker by the minute but nowhere near meek enough to stop.

‘How far?’ Ljudevit asked.

‘Fifty feet.’

Ljudevit walked, keeping his torchlight focused on the staircase. Halfway down, something buckled. Ljudevit’s foot dropped through a step.

His torch slipped from his fingers, plummeting and flailing in the dark. Its light thrashed around like a desperate fox, casting ugly kaleidoscopes on the walls. They stilled with a smash as the torch met the concrete floor.

Ljudevit hung in the blackness of an abandoned nuclear stairway; he screamed for help.

‘Someone,’ he pleaded. ‘Help me!’

‘Ljudevit, calm down. Reorient yourself. Lift yourself out of the staircase.’

Ljudevit obeyed. He blinked the darkness into sense, ignored his throbbing hip and forced himself out of the hole. Looking into the dark below, the torch still shone. He walked, collecting it at the base of the stairs. Shards of glass refracted in the cone of light, scarring the floor with geometric patterns and sharp impressions.

‘Doctor?’ he asked.

‘Maintain use of your torch but be wary of its position near any leftover feedwater. Please proceed.’

Ljudevit took up the light and scanned for the door. *Feedwater Cooling System.*

Through the door to the right, undecorated granite; to the left a perfect procession of copper tubes, jacketed with verdigris. Like soldiers they held formation as Ljudevit moved through the hallway.

Clickclickclickclickclickclick. One hundred msv/h.

Ljudevit stopped and took up another – the final – Geiger counter from the canvas sack. It had a maximum reading of two hundred and fifty msv/h. He turned it on.

Click-click-click-click. One hundred and two msv/h.

Ljudevit wrenched the bag back on his shoulder and continued forward. This was easier than expected; one straight corridor

of repetitive piping.

‘Anything specific for me to look for, doctor?’ Ljudevit asked and wondered why he hadn’t asked earlier.

...kunk...

‘Follow that echo.’

...kunk...

A while ahead, he continued. He hadn’t seen anything of use for plumbing in the sack. The straight corridor broke off into a four-way junction. Each new path looked identical – half stone, half soldiers.

Kunk...

‘Please continue.’

Ljudevit obeyed. As he walked onwards, more paths cut through each other. He now walked a labyrinth.

Kunk...

Ahead and left.

Kunk...

Ahead and right.

Kunk.

Ahead.

Kunk.

Ahead.

Kunk.

Just around the corner.

‘Waaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhh!’

The warbled scream ricocheted around the cramped corridors.

A leg turned into the corridor, then another. They were stumps, rough and metallic. In chaotic bursts, the silver skin split to reveal black scars which faded back to the original shade. Atop the legs, a torso – neither male nor female – and two arms, thick

and blunted, crowned by a head – a featureless, misshapen lump, bulging across the eyebrows and chin.

Clickclickclickclickclickclick. Two hundred and fifty msv/h.

It walked to him and Ljudevit crept back.

‘Waaaaahhhhh!’

Ljudevit stopped.

The golem walked forward and reached its stump to Ljudevit’s torch, held at eye height and poised to stab down. With a rebar’s groan, the stump split into five points – imitation fingers – and grabbed Ljudevit’s wrist.

Everything then nothing. Every pain receptor in Ljudevit’s arm was set ablaze and killed. The golem tightened its grip and Ljudevit’s hand fell to the ground. He pulled away and his stump was black. He fell to his knees.

The golem stepped forward, crushing the torch under-stump, casting all into the void. Ljudevit felt the heat on his visor. It melted away and two imitations touched his eyelids. He dropped unconscious and his eyes turned to water.

March 18, 2011

Dr. Rasmus Kukk, a middle-aged nuclear physicist with balding brown hair and nails chewed to the quick, played the video for Mr. Novak on the EUUR office’s eighth floor. The subject turned the corner into view of the camera, walked forward and grabbed the participant’s wrist. It fell off and the footage stopped.

‘We believe,’ Dr. Beridze, Dr. Kukk’s subordinate, explained, ‘this is the moment when the radioactivity proved too powerful for the camera. It was at a minimum of two hundred and fifty micro

sieverts per hour, likely much higher.'

Mr. Novak sniffed and pressed his fist into his palm. In the conference room's pale LED light, his rough, pallid skin washed out into a vague visage.

Click-clickclick-click. His knuckles cracked.

'We believe that further research could be done safely,' Dr. Kukk took over. 'Although it would require a much larger expedition.'

Mr. Novak stood and signalled his bodyguards to the exit door. Grunting and sniffing, he stopped at the white-plastic doorframe.

'Turn this off,' he told the doctors. 'And you,' he pointed to his bodyguards, 'destroy all evidence of this.'

The taller of the two, bald with nine fingers, reached across Dr. Kukk and snapped the doctors' laptop in two.

'The file will still be retrievable,' Dr. Beridze received a liver punch for speaking.

'It is already destroyed,' Mr. Novak pointed to the doctors. 'You two, with me. You will receive new identities and never speak of this again. If you do, you will be shot.'

The bodyguards left.

'What about our families?' Dr. Beridze rebelled. 'They'll know we're alive.'

'You drive here together?'

'No, Mr. Novak,' Dr. Kukk said. 'Separate cars.'

Novak nodded, 'Come along.'

Mr. Novak left. Beside Dr. Kukk, Dr. Beridze shook, 'This is outrageous.'

'Zurab, please,' Dr. Kukk protested.

'I will not stand for it!' Dr. Beridze left the room.

The shot exploded through the office. Zurab Beridze's corpse

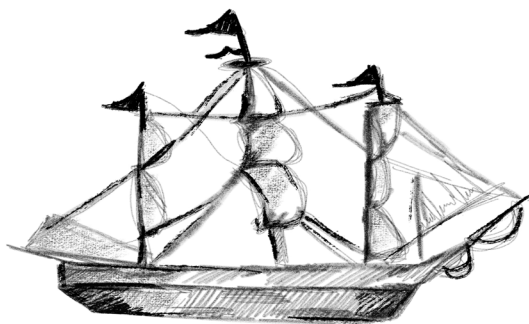
fell backwards through the door; an ugly, spouting entry wound in his forehead. The man once known as Dr. Rasmus Kukk stepped over his body as he followed Mr. Novak out the building.

The Ocean's Calling

Emma Bedder

Emma Bedder is a Derbyshire-based Creative Writing student at the University of Lincoln. She's inspired by out-there worlds the sci-fi and fantasy genres have to offer, as well as a touch of history. In her free time, she's found stuck in a good book or graphic novel.

Content warning: Violence



Isobel looked out over calm seas. Open blue fields were broken up only by the seagulls singing overhead and a trade ship sitting on the horizon. The careful rocking of the deck beneath her feet gave her a peace she hadn't known on land. She knew that before long she would be disturbed by another member of the crew, asking her to help with scrubbing the deck or tying knots or any other odd job that had to be done. She didn't mind though; she liked having something to do around here.

'C'mon, Jim. Best get some work done,' Harry said over her shoulder. Hearing her fake name brought her back to reality and into the role she had to play to maintain her place on this ship. He handed her a mop as he started to scrub the planks. The two of them had spent many a day like this, the bristling of the brush and the wet slides of the mop moving in harmony as they cleaned the deck. The rhythm gave her a similar kind of peace as watching the sea did, the gentle movement of the ocean beneath her joining in with her and Harry's beat.

They went almost unnoticed between the goings about of the ship as they worked. A few other men came above deck, milling about as they engaged in the usual rowdy conversation. Isobel felt no need to join in, nor did she ever. Her hidden identity meant she didn't want to get too close lest someone recognise she was, in fact, a woman. Worse still, they may find that this woman was the missing daughter of the Duke of Norfolk. She kept her eyes down and continued to mop. Footsteps trailed across the deck. Isobel heard a set approach, then felt a hand on her shoulder.

'Alright, Jim? Harry?'

'Alright, Ma'am.' Harry nodded, his eyes hitting the woman's for no longer than a moment. Behind Isobel was Elisabeth Creed, quartermaster on the ship and confidant to the captain. Her grand

coat gave her a large stature, but underneath her clothes were much the same as Isobel's: a grey woollen jacket, a linen shirt and brown baggy pants.

'Alright, Ma'am,' Isobel echoed. It was hard for her not to be resentful of Elisabeth. She'd spent so much time preparing her disguise, learning how to style herself, how to fake a thin enough stubble that no one would look too close. Then she got on the ship itself and found Elisabeth, the feared and respected face that seemed to be at the centre of it all. Isobel knew Elisabeth was the exception, not the rule. She'd seen the crew interact with other women and she had no reason to risk such a thing, even without the hefty bounty on her head. But the captain's trust came with immunity, as it seemed, and Elisabeth had that trust.

'Oh, come on, I've told you. Call me Elisabeth.' Elisabeth put an arm around them both. 'You two've had deck duty all week. You get some rest. I'll make sure it's sorted.'

Isobel sighed and handed the mop over. She and Harry headed below deck, towards the quarters. The layers of wood that surrounded them had a nice sheen to them, despite their age. Captain Russel kept a tight ship aboard the Royal Hawk, hence their near constant scrubbing of the decks. Isobel had to appreciate it; despite everything, she wasn't sure how long she'd have lasted on a rougher vessel.

The quarters themselves weren't as pristine, the crew caring little to keep their hammocks clean. Isobel had no room to judge. It seemed everyone else had other duties, giving them the room to themselves. She lay in her hammock, while Harry sat against the floor.

'You know, I was just starting to get into a rhythm there.'

'Oh, 'ere we go.' Harry rolled his eyes.

‘What? It’s just an observation.’

‘It’s just I’m hearing a lot of your “observations” every time something like this happens.’

‘And what of it?’ Isobel’s original, upper-class accent came back for a moment. ‘I’m within my right to complain.’

‘Complain at what? Not doing work?’ Harry laid back. ‘I get it. You’re jealous. But that’s hardly Elisabeth’s fault, is it?’

‘Jealous? I’m not jealous.’

Harry laughed. ‘Yes, you are. I mean, it’s understandable given the circumstances. But there’s little point taking it out on Elisabeth.’

‘Fine.’ Isobel crossed her arms. ‘I get your point.’

‘Good. She’s a good quartermaster, if you ever gave her the chance. Much better than the last one, believe me.’

‘As you’ve told me.’ Isobel rolled her eyes this time. ‘You lot never get tired of bringing him up, do you?’

‘Well, you’ll have to excuse us. Crew defecting to the navy like that tends to leave a wound.’ He grinned, then muttered to himself, ‘Especially Larrington.’

‘Whatever you say, old man,’ Isobel huffed, feeling the hammock sway beneath her. The waves were rougher now and the ship in the distance seemed a little closer. She grinned. If she was lucky, there’d be a raid soon. Sitting here in the quarters, she was no use to the crew, no matter what Elisabeth said. On a raid, she could prove her worth.

After a few minutes, she could feel the ship turn. Isobel relaxed into the hammock. Her hand trailed to her cutlass, held at her side at all times. The coarse waves outside were a sweet motivator for what was to come, the crash of water against the ship reminding her of the last time she’d unsheathed her sword.

‘D’you...’ Harry cleared his throat, interrupting Isobel’s

dreaming. She'd almost forgotten about his presence. Beside her, sitting on the wooden deck, he cast his eyes upwards as if he were speaking to the ship itself. 'D'y'ever think about leaving?'

'Leave? Never.' Isobel spat the words out. 'Why? Thinking of quitting? Getting too old for it, I imagine.'

'Dream on. I've still got years of this left in me.' He gave her a smirk, which soon faded. 'I dunno, I just... don't you think we're meant for a little more than this, Isobel?'

'Careful. This is a small ship.' Isobel glared at Harry for a moment and fixed her hat over her head.

'Right. Sorry, "Jim"?' Harry returned her glare with his own tired look. He took his hat from his head and held it in his hands. 'But still, I'm just not sure I want to spend the rest of my days doing bugger all on this hunk of wood.'

Isobel considered this for a moment, but her thoughts were cut short by an echoing bell and the sounds of heavy footsteps.

'Looks like you won't have to, old man.' Isobel leapt up from her hammock and ran out of the quarters. Harry followed along, an exasperated sigh trailing behind her. Back on the deck, Isobel found most of the rest of the crew stood around the door from which Thomas Russel, captain of the Royal Hawk, emerged. He was a tall man, with an unkempt beard, crooked teeth, and a permanent scowl. It gave him the look of someone who'd been on the sea years longer than he cared to count.

'Alright, lads, give me some space.' He batted them away and took a spyglass from his chest pocket. He directed it toward the trade ship on the distance, though by now it almost seemed pointless. From here, Isobel could see small figures walking around its deck, moving around cargo and scrubbing the planks. The ship itself was small, by Isobel's eye, carrying no more than light cargo.

It was well-built but indefensible in the case of attack.

After a few minutes, the captain had rallied the men into a quick plan to plunder the vessel. They'd done this many times before and everyone had their jobs. Isobel had learned it was little more than a matter of making the crew of the other boat scared enough to give them what they wanted. That was a simple task; most ships weren't equipped to withstand a violent onboarding by a crew of armed men. Isobel had been tasked with going aboard and keeping the other crew in line. It was a job that she had been eager to prove herself useful at in the first few outings after she'd joined. The first time she did, she had to run to the other ship, leaping between decks. Her sword wasn't even hers, taken straight from Harry's hands.

The ship was even closer now and Isobel could get a better look. Its wood gleamed and its sails were a sharp white; it looked like it hadn't seen a month's travel. The Union flag flew above, blowing in the wind as the Royal Hawk let off its first warning shots. It slowed down, knowing what the crew of the Hawk already did. There was no point fighting back; they had already lost. Isobel headed to the other side of the deck, where a small boat was being lowered into the water. She joined the boarding party of around a dozen men, while the remaining crew continued to demoralise the trade ship by waving cutlasses and firing their muskets into the air.

As she waited for the boat to be lowered into the water, she and her crewmates shared excited glances. She didn't often talk to any of them; there wasn't much to talk about on a ship, a problem amplified when her entire life was a lie. There was a camaraderie amongst the crew though, in a moment like this. Even amongst nights of sung shanties and shared jokes, for men like this, there was nothing like the glee of taking a ship together. The loot they

shared afterwards wasn't so bad either. It was between these shared looks that Elisabeth leapt onto the boat.

'Alright, lads?' Elisabeth shouted, the cheer of the other men her echo. She'd landed next to Isobel; the rest huddled in a circle around the two. Elisabeth nudged Isobel in the shoulder. 'Alright, Jim. Good day for it, eh?'

The crew sat down as the four closest to the corners took up the oars next to them. Elisabeth stood at the helm, with Isobel taking a begrudging seat beside her. She didn't like how Elisabeth singled her out. Isobel was good at her job, true enough, so she supposed it was difficult to avoid some connection forged in that. Any attention on her was to be avoided, though, from a woman like Elisabeth.

The boat's journey there was tough. Waves fought hard against them, but the strength of the rowers forced them forward towards the ship. The distance between the two ships was minimal, taking them no more than ten minutes before they bumped up against the ship's hull. Boarding axes left their sides and hacked into the wood like nautical ice picks they could use to pull themselves upwards. This was a practised manoeuvre for them, and the crew of the trade ship was terrified enough already that they weren't paying the attention needed to stop them. On the deck itself, they ran forward to the sailors that remained above deck. Those brave souls, still ready to face them, dropped whatever they were holding and braced themselves for the attack.

Behind her, Elisabeth yelled a command, but Isobel wasn't listening. She already had her cutlass up against the throat of some poor seaman, herding him towards the centre of the ship. The rest of the boarding party seemed to have the same idea, and soon they'd rounded up the crew. The others went below deck to search

for loot and the other men, leaving Elisabeth and Isobel to keep watch. Isobel made a show of swinging her sword at a few of the men, the faux slashes in time with the rocking of the ship.

The riches were carried from the boat's underbelly behind them, the sailors now in line. Elisabeth seemed to delight in much the same theatrical threats as Isobel did, their swords brandished as they circled their prisoners. They got into a rhythm, stepping in time and taking turns aiming a strike a foot away from someone's head. Elisabeth stopped when Captain Russel shouted an order to fire grappling hooks to bring the trade ship and the Royal Hawk together, giving a questioning glare his way. He returned the gaze with a tired look of his own. As the two boats got closer, the men of the boarding party began to be able to hop between the two ships' decks while carrying their loot. Elisabeth returned to keep her hold over the merchants, while Isobel's cutlass swings grew more wild.

As she was threatening the air in front of a cabin boy with another sharp slash, Isobel's peace was disturbed by a shout coming from the Royal Hawk. She didn't hear the words but instead followed the gaze of every other member of the crew to see, in the distance, a ship headed straight for them. It had snuck up behind them in their attack, now much too close for comfort. Amidst the shouts, the captain's voice was booming.

'Back to The Hawk,' he said, and the men ran back over to their ship. Isobel and a few men stayed back, undoing the grappling hooks tied to the rigging of the trade ship. She climbed up the rigging to where a hook had hit higher in the ropes. The wind whistled against her face, the briny sea breeze hitting her as she reached further up. From here, she got a better look at the approaching ship. It was resplendent and polished, the Union flag

flying proud above its sails. Just below that, however, was another flag, one bearing the coat of arms of the Duke of Norfolk. Isobel felt a pit in her stomach. Her hand slipped to the watch in her back pocket, which she clutched for a moment. She pulled the hook down without looking, her eyes stuck on the ship now close enough to see the shapes of the royal marines positioned upon it. She scaled down the rigging and ran onto the ship, returning the hook on her way to find Harry.

‘We have to leave,’ she said, pulling him away from the other men. She made no eye contact as she dragged him below deck.

‘What?’

‘That ship flies the banner of my father,’ Isobel hissed, collecting the few things she owned in a small satchel.

‘Oh, bloody hell.’ Harry moved beside her to help. ‘What’s the plan, then?’

‘Don’t know. But we need to get out of here.’

‘True enough.’ Footsteps fell towards the quarters as Elisabeth showed herself. Her voice carried through the wooden chamber, even with her hushed tones. ‘Can’t have his lordship taking his little princess back, can we?’

Isobel dropped her satchel. Elisabeth had a sly look on her face that Isobel would consider wiping off in any other circumstance.

‘The hell does that mean?’

‘It means you’ve done a damn good job of hiding yourself, but you ain’t fooling me.’ Elisabeth knocked Isobel’s hat upwards. ‘Means I do my research on my crew.’

‘Damn it...’ She shot a glare at Harry. There was no other way she could’ve found out, at least not about the Duke being her father. He slunk back, so she returned her attention to Elisabeth.

‘Fine. What’s it to you, anyway?’

‘Nothing much. Just that if we’re both planning on escaping, we’d best do it together.’ Elisabeth looked towards Harry. ‘Russel thinks Larrington’s on there. Wants to take him on.’

‘Is he right?’ Harry’s mouth went agape.

‘Does it matter? It’s a suicide mission. Best those of us with any sense get out of here soon as we can.’

‘Alright, then.’ Isobel closed her satchel and slung it over her shoulder. ‘What’s your plan?’

‘Well, I s’pose we could sneak onto the trade ship, but you and I made it pretty certain none of them’ll be forgetting our faces any time soon.’ She turned out of the quarters. ‘So, it’ll have to be the boarding boat.’

The three of them hurried out above deck. The ship had turned the other way, now headed straight for the navy vessel. All the rest of the crew shouted and waved weapons, while Captain Russel stood glaring at the ship, his hand on his cutlass. The boarding boat had just been pulled back onto the ship, so the three pushed it into the water and got on.

‘There should be land not far east from here,’ Elisabeth said, as they got on to the small raft. ‘Best get rowing.’

The seas were terrible and the skies had darkened. They rowed into it as fast as they could. By the time they saw the two ships had reached each other, the shouts were distant cries. Isobel squinted, able to make out the captain raising his sword in anger as another man held a gun at him. The last she saw was the distant flash of gunfire, Russel crumpling to the deck. The feeling in Isobel’s stomach swelled up, and the peace she had grown used to changed into a horrible seasickness. Her eyes moved back to the front of the boat, and she rowed into the dour seas ahead.

‘Guess that’s the end of it, eh?’ Elisabeth piped up between heavy breaths, moving the oars. ‘It was a good run. Good crew. I’ll miss ‘em.’

‘Speak for yourself.’ Harry struggled with his own oar. ‘I was going to leave on the next port anyway.’

‘Ah, well, you’re more than due it,’ Elisabeth said, before she cast her eyes to Isobel. ‘And what about you, princess? Where next?’

‘Don’t call me that,’ Isobel snapped and took the oar away from Harry to row herself. ‘And... I don’t know.’

‘Well, you’re pretty useful for a noble’s kid. Be nice to have you around for whatever comes next.’ Elisabeth nudged a shoulder into Isobel, now sat beside each other as Harry moved to the back. ‘You got a name?’

‘Thought you did your research?’

‘I did, but your friend over there didn’t say much. Best I could get was that you’re noble blood.’ Isobel traced her eyes over Harry. He hadn’t ratted her out all the way, at least. ‘Heck, I wouldn’t even have figured you were the Duke’s daughter if you hadn’t made such a panic.’

Isobel sat with herself for a moment. Though the skies were still grey, the waters ahead were calmer. Blue started to fade back into their surroundings. She took in a deep breath.

‘It’s Isobel.’ The boat trudged forwards as she started to put her back into it. She prepared herself for a long row ahead, the nearest land not yet in sight. ‘My name is Isobel.’

Thoughts of Leamington

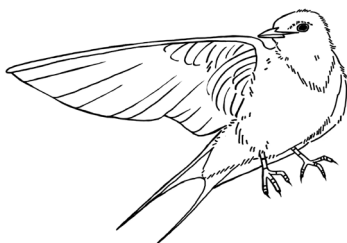
James O'Boyle

James O'Boyle is a Nottingham based writer, studying at the University of Lincoln. His preferred form of writing is poetry, following his first publication in 2022. He centres his writing around nature, personal experiences and birds.

In his free time, he enjoys bird-watching, travelling and spending time with loved ones.

Oulipo is a literary movement that explores how mathematical and structural constraints can generate new forms of writing.

In poetry, constraints such as following strict patterns or avoiding a certain letter limit the writer's choices but spark creativity by forcing unexpected language, rhythm and ideas.



Anything Goes

Straight through, stay don't stray,
Early evening, the pink green swallows.
Dogs' white teeth slice right through my fist,
Virtual bedroom, rise like a full moon, Our palms met in
the cold sweat.
Roll the windows down, shoot out the change
Up to my ears,
I cover you with questions
And I try to calm the wolf When the hot sand
burns my feet. My angel, my angel.

August 27th

Balloons rolled across the ceiling as my favourite caramel

cheesecake waited another hour. Someone

asked my name, I answered correctly. Why

is there so much Pepsi left? Jessie
is

still washing the dishes, it's not

even her house. Spirits leached across the marble surface,
growing ever closer to the

bowls of crisps and cocktail sausages. Slurred voices invaded my
thoughts, providing necessary distraction.

Sausage rolls fell off my paper plate, my appetite elsewhere.

(PI)eces of Korea

Can I give a smile, following my sorrow. Light our faces, laughter,
wonderful through stability. You, at the complete dawn, wonder,
as frozen eyes fly far, whenever all my perfect, exchanged heart
is complete darkness.

Only I comforted nothing. A broken flowerbed, two shoulders,
beautiful day, trapped night, I leave goodbyes in somewhere
amongst eyes, expecting your love. You're irritable. Me too.
Blinded Starling, I gladly hold.

Amidst my troubled return to
coldness, happiness, forgotten.

Tomorrow drifts by, whispers

fly like Swallows. My young eye, cold to expressions,
settles.

Summer follows, countless blossoms as I gaze, watching laugh-
ter return. Could a day as glorious as you remain choked with
flowers.

Tomorrow's sun comforts, soon snow leaves,

fragrance fills stony paths, guidance to us.

Before Spring Ends

I used to hear the valleys echo
Glistening with the river
As the little Dippers flew
Faint chirps of Meadow Pipits
Lining the rocky hills
Under strict surveillance
Cattle roamed free
Greeting their usual visitors
Taking any shrivelled carrots
Buttons and sticks lay too
Not quite so fortunate
Skylarks don't chatter
Not even with the Corn Buntings
And you hate the Geese
But you still stayed with me
Before spring ends
Come with me once more

An Autumn Night

A dead curse deserted
Among raw poems of cold eyes frozen hate, a mouth given pity.
Is this over?

Silence sank, tongues lie, winter invaded in seas.

You punished us,

rumours under a voice persuade, verse of mad beasts.

The Protectors of Flame

Niamh Rooney

Niamh Rooney is a writer based in Derbyshire, studying Creative Writing at the University of Lincoln. Specialising in fantasy, she loves writing complex worlds and characters whilst occasionally using her Irish heritage as her source of influence. When she isn't writing, she can be found creating art or hiking around in nature.

Content warnings: Blood.



With the tip of my mother's dagger, I scraped the dried blood and dirt from under my nails and embraced the upheaval of disapproval pouring from the mouths of my Cadre.

Clad in their usual black leathers in the centre of the meeting chamber, all six members joined me around the table. The overlap of their curses and shouts failed to hold any weight as I slouched in my chair of stone, seated at the head of the table. I'd been Chief of the Atarian Warriors for just shy of three years and the reaction I'd witnessed was not as positive as I expected. It was such a rare thing for my Cadre and I to find ourselves in any kind of disagreement. But I'd never seen them quite like this, never faced my Cadre in such an outburst. No matter how justified it may be, they were in no mind to praise my choice in violence.

My face was still splattered with his blood, each speck a reminder that by my sword he'd bled royal red. But to them it only fuelled their disapproval. I'd beheaded the Prince of Vaerim, the eldest heir to the Golden Throne, just yesterday, and I wore his blood on my face like a trophy.

We had been enemies with Vaerim for millennia and together we were the longest-standing enemies on the entire continent. Wars upon wars, all because they wanted to claim Ataria as their own, to feed their greed and grow their power. My ancestors, born into a land unruled and unclaimed by anyone, fought to keep Ataria from any kingdom that dared try claim it. For three thousand years, Ataria had remained ruled and protected by the people and no Vaerimese royal, or another royal, would ever change that.

So, of course, there were no words my Cadre could ever utter to make me regret my decision. In my vision, there was only his death; the emptiness of his crystal blue eyes as his head separated from his golden-armoured body and rolled onto the forest's sod-

den floor, over and over again.

I focused on the sound of crackling fire pits adorning the walls. Their orange glow danced on the dark stone, freely and uncaged. The spitting of flames was calming in my ears, a sound many who lived in the castle were fond of, and the warmth of their light signalled I was home – for no flame burned brighter than the flames of Ataria.

All the warriors seated at the table I admired and trusted with my life more than anyone else, aside from one. I preferred to ignore the comments slithering out of the Commander of the Specialists' mouth. He often spoke out of turn and had hated my father – an emotion he had redirected at me. But, as much as it felt wrong to praise him, Commander Finnian was an exceptionally smart man when he wasn't whining about my choices as his Chief. He didn't like taking orders from my father and certainly didn't take mine without resistance. In truth, taking orders from an eighteen-year-old wasn't the position the Commander thought he'd be in. He wanted to be Chief.

Tough. My father bestowed this honour upon me with his death. Granted, I'd never wanted to be Chief, but I wouldn't make a fool of my family's name. I commanded all the warriors in Ataria – over four thousand men and women who looked to me to protect our home. The Commanders before me made the weight of Ataria's fate a little less heavy on my shoulders.

The Commander of the Medics sat directly opposite me, as he always had. He was the only member not in black leather but dressed in trousers and a loose tunic decorated with golden knots on his sleeves – the colour of the Medic Faction. Commander Ultan was the eldest member of this Cadre and the longest serving member of any. He'd been a part of my father's Cadre and there

was never a moment when my father valued anyone else's opinion more than his.

Commander Ultan was a reliable man, honest and attentive as well as calm, both within and outside the castle's walls. So one could imagine my surprise when he succumbed and joined the other Commanders in all that noise. The outburst itself had been ongoing for, my guess, almost twenty minutes.

Ultan only managed forty seconds. I'd counted. He'd tired himself out and spent the remainder watching, giving a swift nod here and there, hitting his walking stick on the ground in unison with their curses. The darkness of his skin and the gold and black of his tunic were striking against the pale green eyes he was blessed with. Wrinkles covered his skin, some more prominent around the hands and eyes. His flat nose bore a small scar, stretching across its bridge.

He had me to thank for that.

The only other member of my Cadre to remain quiet sat to my right. Imelda Eoghan – the Commander of the Infantry and my chosen Second – sat with her tattooed hands resting on her lap as she watched the uproar erupt with a grin on her face. The underside of her hair was freshly shaved and the waterline of her eyes was coloured black. The ink under her sleeves of leather armour expanded across her arms and torso and emerged just shy of her armour's neckline. I wouldn't have been surprised if Imelda had added more tattoos in the two days I'd been away.

Her eyes of ice met the fire of mine and her grin grew. The corners of my mouth curved upwards with it, causing a spec of royal blood to crack a little.

The two members who'd accompanied me – Commander Tadhg and Commander Laoise – to Ravakine and the Laylik For-

est, where the prince's body remained, agreed with my decision. The pair had watched me unsheathe my sword and behead the prince with no flicker of doubt in their eyes. Commander Laoise, who commanded the Archer Faction, had been the first to initiate the attack on the Vaerimese soldiers who'd trespassed into Ataria's lands. She'd have killed the prince herself, but his life was mine to claim. I'd watched her battle with restraint as I walked towards Vaerim's prince with no intention of taking him prisoner. Commander Tadhg stood with his Trackers – his commanding Faction – and the wolves they were bonded to with nothing but justice protruding from his puffed-out chest at the sight of the heir on his knees.

The two of them spoke against the remaining two members who believed my decision to be rash. Killing him was a lapse in judgment, my anger getting the better of me, apparently.

I shifted in my chair, flipping my dagger in the air as I said into the noise, 'The Vaerimese soldiers have retreated from Ravakine and our northern border.'

Silence began to descend in the meeting chamber and all eyes were on mine.

Tadhg, who sat to my left, traced his fingers on the intricately carved table, along the various knots and patterns that weaved through one another, with such patience, as though the knots could unravel the very thoughts in his mind. Loose grey strands from his slick ponytail stuck to the sides of his sweaty temples. He too wore black armour, with the difference being the colour of purple sewn into his right bicep. Each member of my Cadre, to identify the faction they commanded, wore a coloured band woven into the leather – aside from Ultan, who wore the colour of gold in knots across his clothes.

I expected him to speak but it was the Commander of the Armourers who said, ‘Chief, this will be seen as an act of war. They will return with an army.’ Her locks of hair matched the colour of the flames decorating the chamber’s walls and hid the sewn-in silver band around her bicep as it spilt over her armour, falling to a stop at her hips. ‘Their prince is dead, King Ødger will want your head for that.’

‘He’s wanted my head since I was sixteen.’

‘And he gets closer each time,’ Commander Bláthnaid shot back, her brows furrowed and her brown eyes narrowed in frustration. But I saw past it, to the concern that swam there in its wake.

Of course, the most enthusiastic participant in the outburst finally chimed in. ‘She is right. The King of Vaerim will want revenge, if not *war*. Your rashness, once again, has put Ataria in harm’s way,’ Finnian said, arms across his chest, a hand resting on the blue band on his arm, as he referred to a battle a few months prior.

A battle we won, might I add. I hadn’t even initiated it. Laoise had released the first arrow which pierced the eye of the King’s right hand. Safe to say after that a battle was inevitable.

His voice tended to drill into one’s brain louder than any other. It seemed it was his only natural talent. He enjoyed complaining. Usually, the only thing to get me through his whiny little monologues was to envision leaping onto the table and shoving my fist so far down his throat that he’d choke on his words for once in his life.

He droned on and my eyes couldn’t have rolled back further into my head if I’d tried.

‘Your stupidity is now proving to be a liability, *Chief*.’ The slight mockery in his tone didn’t go unnoticed by anyone. Imelda turned

her head to the man she loathed as much as me and said with an unnerving amount of softness, 'I haven't seen you ever wield a sword in the face of death, *Odhran*. In fact, I don't think I've even seen you pick up a weapon. Don't talk of being a liability when the only battles you've ever seen are on a page detailed by ink.'

Imelda was the same age as me, only two months older, and being Second to the Chief of the Atarian Warriors meant she was the second highest ranking warrior in all Ataria. Finnian was just reminded of the fact rather politely. She held restraint, but Imelda was already tempted to rise from her chair and give him a firm smack across his scar-free face.

A low growl boomed from the opposite end of the meeting chamber.

Guarding the closed oak doors that stretched to the height of the vaulted ceiling was Tadhg's bonded, Conmaol. He was the largest wolf to appear in a century. His eyes were the size of my palm, the length of his legs exceeded my five-foot-nine frame, his canines were longer and thicker than my fingers and those claws could kill me with one swipe. His thick white fur was a star against the darkened walls and his eyes were locked on Finnian. Like Imelda, Conmaol didn't appreciate the lack of respect.

The Commander of the Specialists shot his gaze across the table. 'Control your wolf, *Cianán*.'

Tadhg slowly shifted his attention from the knots on the table to Finnian. 'For a man of your intellect, you do say some rather daft things,' he chuckled. 'Does he look like an animal to be controlled? You disrespect his Chief so openly, and not for the first time.'

When I was younger, Conmaol would chase me through the lavender fields outside the castle grounds. Each time he'd go faster

and for longer, building up my endurance until he was confident I could outrun the majority of our enemies. He'd stood next to me at my father's funeral and stayed with me each night for a week after it, which would've taken a toll on his and Tadhg's bond. Yet he did it anyway. He'd only ever been gentle with me, a friend in some way. But still, knowing he could kill me whenever he wanted was enough to keep me wary. Something Finnian was wishing he'd done.

'They take orders, so give him one,' Commander Finnian bit back, pointing at Conmaol.

Conmaol rose from the floor, his claws scratching against stone as he neared the table. The fires around flickered with Conmaol's movement.

Laoise tapped her fingers in a sporadic rhythm on the table and said, 'He takes suggestions, not orders.' Her grey hair glistened as though light from the stars were contained within it and remained in the same style she wore every day; a large braid running down the centre of her head, with the rest of her hair left untouched. Her green eyes lifted from the table to meet Bláthnaid's for a second and the pair couldn't help but smile.

Finnian feared the wolves and everyone in the castle knew it. He avoided them as best he could. Conmaol knew it, too, and always made an effort to scare the commander at least once a week.

'They can also understand every word you say as though our language is their common tongue,' Tadhg added.

I could see the sheer regret in Finnian's blue eyes as he ran a hand through his thick auburn hair. His eyes were stuck on the table, entirely avoiding Conmaol's approach.

'Am I right in remembering, an Atarian wolf can hear further than any animal on the continent?' Ultan gripped his walking stick

just a little bit tighter as he leaned forward in his chair.

Tadhg nodded and watched his bonded bare his teeth, allowing a canine to graze the top of Finnian's ear. 'Conmaol values many things. Respect is one of them.'

Finnian froze in place, his cheeks draining of colour.

'Would you like to elaborate on my stupidity?' I asked, playing with the ends of my raven hair.

He dared not move.

Conmaol let out a noise that I had come to learn was his laugh as he retreated to sit behind the Commander's chair. Finnian had broken out into a cold sweat; I could see the little beads forming on his forehead, trailing down his pale face.

A moment passed and I looked around the table. My Cadre's focus was on the Commander of the Specialists, except Bláthnaid's, whose brown eyes clashed with the amber of mine.

Wasting no time, she steered the conversation to where it needed to be and said, 'The King gets closer and closer to taking our northern stronghold each time. Killing his son won't cause him to abandon his beliefs.' She paused, looking at each member at the table. 'There will be retaliation.'

Like the kings before him, King Ødger insisted our northern city and stronghold Ravakine was his birthright as it was the only city claimed by ice and snow that Vaerim had no ruling in.

Imelda crossed her arms against her chest, tattooed hands on display, and sighed. 'King Ødger wants what he cannot have. We increased our border patrol in the north. Tadhg,' she gestured her head in his general direction, 'has added four more squads of his Trackers and their bonded. The wall is protected by more warriors than it has been in a century. The king won't be getting through our defences again.'

She was right. With the Trackers patrolling the border day and night there was no possibility of a Vaerimese soldier slipping through the defences and that was before I even considered their bonded. Atarian wolves were feared by our enemies and not in the way Finnian was. He was born of Atarian blood, so no wolf would actually harm him, but it was always amusing to make him question such a possibility.

Nothing would go undetected by the wolves and once they caught scent of something, they usually only stopped when it was dead. Though there was a phrase our enemies knew: *'In the face of an Atarian wolf, there is only one choice – run as fast as you are capable and then pray they get bored with the chase.'*

Except they never got bored. It offered our enemies a false sense of hope.

'When I became Chief, I made it clear I wouldn't be a copy of my father. I made it clear that if any Vaerimese soldier was spotted less than a mile near our northern border, they would be shot down,' I stated. My father was a mighty Chief but he was also cautious and that allowed Vaerim to grow in confidence. The battle two days ago was evidence of that. 'We cannot allow our enemies to believe there will be no consequence to ignoring Ataria's warning.'

It was Ultan who recited the warning all our enemies knew. *"To trespass onto Atarian soil is to provoke her protectors and ensure one's own demise. Do not chance fate, for fate holds no power in a land determined by blood and wrath."*

I could sense the change in the Commander of the Medics; he looked at me with softness. I'd known this man my entire life; I knew his tells. Commander Ultan agreed with me through a gentle nod from the opposite end of the table.

‘He ignored that warning,’ I shrugged, ‘and sent his son here to kill me with a hundred men. I was well within my rights to behead him.’ I’d be lying to myself if I said I hadn’t taken offence to King Ødger only sending one hundred men to kill me. I’d expected the number to be higher.

Laoise added, ‘With you dead, he’d expect Ataria to crumble.’

‘With her dead,’ Imelda promised, ‘it would be war. We have no royalty. Our Chief is the closest thing we have to it. Killing Aideen –’ it wasn’t often she addressed me by my first name in these meetings, so I knew the threats to my life were finally getting to her ‘– would be an act of war, and an attempt on her life would be seen as such. So, he is lucky we aren’t declaring war.’

Finnian, voice still a little shaky on account of the wolf sitting behind him, added, ‘We could very well have a war on our hands, regardless of that fact. And if not a war, then he’ll come for your head.’

I looked him in the eye and said, ‘Then let him come for it. I bested his son. I am sure I can best an old man like himself.’ To my left, Tadhg shook his head with a smile. He knew the confidence I had in my ability on a battlefield and in a swordfight was justified and not a sign of cockiness. He opened his mouth to speak but a knock sounded on the doors.

Finnian’s apprentice burst through with no breath in his lungs and a scroll gripped tightly in his hand. The blonde-haired warrior made for the table and insisted, ‘This cannot wait, Chief.’

With his nearing, I noted the seal on the scroll: a two-headed eagle stamped on green wax, the sigil of Ataria’s only ally, Thaldor. I moved out of my chair and crossed the space between in seconds, taking the scroll from his hands. Not one member of my Cadre spoke and the fires in the chamber appeared hushed, their

warmth retracting as their flames shrank.

Breaking the seal, I read the familiar handwriting of King Ezra, whom I'd known since I was a child. Our fathers had become great friends and even stronger allies as they strengthened trade and protected both Thaldor and Ataria from beasts within and enemies from afar. But within my hands was King Ezra's rejection of that very alliance.

I read his words aloud for all my Cadre to hear.

“To the protectors of Ataria, I revoke Thaldor’s affiliation. My soldiers will retreat from our shared border by dusk. All trading will cease and no Atarian will have access to my kingdom, nor will they come within a mile of the border. I wished it not to be this way, but the unlawful killing of the Prince of Vaerim makes it so. Thaldor pledges allegiance to Vaerim. To be an ally with Ataria is to be an enemy of all those who dwell on the continent and my kingdom’s survival comes before anything else. Signed, King Ezra of Thaldor.”

How could he ally with a kingdom who brought so much pain to their people?

My Cadre knew better than to speak – even Finnian kept his mouth shut. Imelda rose from her chair, taking the scroll from my scarred hands.

‘It seems Vaerim has already spread the word of their Prince’s death. Spoke their own false accounts of the battle.’ I shook my head, a laugh escaping my lips. Of course they had. I knew my truth and killing their heir was lawful. He’d trespassed into my home with the intent of slitting my throat. His only mistake was believing it could be done by his own blade. But for Ezra, a boy I played with in this very chamber whilst our fathers spoke of ways to better each of our homes, to believe the Frost King’s words before even seeking mine? That was something I wasn’t sure I could

forgive.

‘What is to be done, Chief?’ Laoise asked, rising from her chair. With her movement, Tadhg stood too, Conmaol mirroring his bonded’s movements.

I looked to my Second, to the blue of Imelda’s eyes, noting what was already obvious. She’d follow me anywhere. I turned to my Cadre. ‘Ready the horses. We leave for Thaldor before dusk. If King Ezra wishes to believe a tyrant over the true words of a friend, then I shall remind him what becoming an enemy to Ataria means.’

‘You are planning on threatening another king?’ Finnian blurted.

‘I am to remind him of what our fathers stood for, but if it comes to it, yes. For Ataria, we cannot lose this alliance.’

‘We won’t,’ Imelda assured. ‘King Ezra is no fool. He will see sense.’

‘Conmaol and I will journey with you, Chief,’ Tadhg said, knowing the presence of any wolf would further the persuasion.

I nodded. ‘Imelda, gather a squad of infantry and have them ready by the gates,’ I ordered. She moved quickly, placing the scroll on the table before knocking Finnian on the head with her elbow as she passed. She headed straight for the doors, the brown of her ponytail swinging with her movements, and offered me one last glance before disappearing into the corridor.

‘Thaldor is a powerful ally to have and we don’t want to anger their King,’ Finnian reminded.

‘I don’t care to anger him. I care to remind him that without Ataria their crops will decrease by half, our warriors can outfight their soldiers on the border we share with little more than a sweat, and we can cut off any possible trade with Vaerim with one simple

blockade. Thaldor will meet starvation if the alliance with Vaerim continues. But with Ataria, Thaldor will ensure their survival.'

I just had to make Ezra believe it and, for Ataria, I would. I snatched the scroll from the table, crushing it in my hands before throwing it into one of the fire pits. The sound of Thaldor's betrayal sizzling in my home fuelled the fire coursing through my veins. I strode for the meeting chamber doors, my twin swords sheathed on my back, my mother's daggers clinging to the sides of my thighs, with my mind set on only one thing: the survival of my home. Friend or not, if he was to be my enemy, I would push a blade through his heart without hesitation. For Ataria, I would do anything, and he knew that.

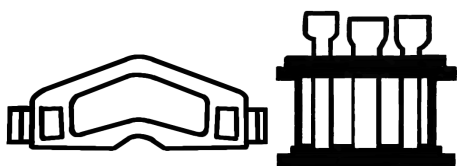
I only prayed Ezra saw sense before I made him.

The Science of Remembering

Cait Budworth

Cait Budworth is an English writer studying a Creative Writing degree at the University of Lincoln.

She spends most of her time reading and writing romance and mystery novels. When she is not writing, she can be found watching movies with her flatmates or taking her dog for a walk.



Blazing orange fills the screen as he stands behind the desk. Through dismembered crevices of brick and plaster, he listens as the people scream. They barge past each other, clawing red crescents into their palms as they grasp tightly onto a chance at escape. The fire's smoke grows fiercer, its ash enveloping them in its cindered embrace. He watches as the smoke suffocates them. Pavements he has rushed across hundreds of thousands of times now covered in debris, blocking the inferno's escape.

He sees the office next, engaged by the fire. He watches as the pylons lose their shape, as its lightbulbs burst, and their desks char. As it rages on, he can do nothing but stare as he loses everything that made that office theirs. His eyes move to the door next, as his colleagues struggle to make it out. Their scrunched up faces vivid on the screen and accepting their fate now engraved forever in his memory. The TV in the pub that is still somehow standing plays the news.

Every city, town, and village is dying. Everywhere is collapsing in on itself.

Cracks break open along the ground, splitting everything into sections. Every sign, lamp post, car and building spill into the willing opening.

The world is falling apart.

He stands back from the screen, lost and shaken from what he has just witnessed. The memory plays in his head like a supereut. Seconds lapse like days, as he watches his life collapse. Everything he knew and loved, gone in seconds. Amongst the dread, one question lingers: 'How could this have happened?'

The words prang in his brain. It eats him up. Rack-ing his brain over and over for a logical explanation, for an answer

of what he's just witnessed.

'Dr Peterson?' a soft voice breaks through.

He slams the laptop in front of him shut, turning off the replay. Two quick shaky breaths leave him before he goes to face the door.

'Miss Jane,' the acknowledgment is clear, 'How can I help?'

'I was just wondering if you were done with the past memories?'

'Unfortunately, I am not.'

'Do you know when you will be?' She clears her throat and taps her black loafer against the tiled floor.

'Any reason for such rush, Miss Jane?'

'No sir.'

As she speaks, her eyelashes flutter against the cool breeze of the open window. It shields her gaze, that has now scaled down the doctor's tie as she counts the buttons on his shirt. His eyes bear down on her like cold, white spotlights; looking into them would be nothing more than a giveaway.

'You know using these files for personal use is strictly prohibited, right?'

'Yes sir.'

'Then I'll ask you again. Why the rush?'

Her face blooms ruby red as she looks down at her feet. Miss Jane had always been a quiet girl; from the minute she got her placement here. If you asked her a question she'd stumble before she could reply. Most people found it annoying; he found it endearing. This girl who is adventuring into the world of science has pushed herself all the way to the forefront. She was always a contender. In fact, she is one of the only students that the company has accepted for placement here. The recollection lab is one of the

most sought-after jobs for any scientist. Even the failed applicants boast about the opportunity to interview there, due to the area they control. They handle the most important section of the science world; they store and control the memory log. They all end up at the lab, sooner or later. Memories people have chosen to erase, pasts too traumatic to keep, the lab filters through them all. The gift of blissful ignorance. That's how Miss Jane had always seen it.

'Miss Jane?' He tries to break through to her but there is no flutter in her stance. 'Are you alright?'

She continues to stand directly in front of him unmoving, her eyes locked onto the files drawer he had left open early this morning. Her hands shake as she continues to stare, her face transforming into fear.

'Jane?' His concern for her grows.

She is still transfixed by the opened drawer, like it is holding her captive. He is completely lost on what to do or how to help her. Her fear of something has taken control of her body and frozen her to stone. He's aware that if someone were to walk past this room at any moment his job and her entire future in science could be on the line.

He makes his way over to the drawer; the missing file gap is prominent but there is nothing else that could cause such a reaction. He edges his hands closer to the drawer, keeping his eyes locked on Jane. He can feel the cold metal graze across his fingertips causing shivers to go up his arm and with a slight push and a squeak from the door it is closed. The minute the drawer slides back to its original place Jane snaps out of it completely; her hands stop shaking and her eyes take themselves off the drawer and around the room until they lock onto him.

'What happened?' Her voice shakes, the confusion and fear

still in her tone.

‘You froze up. Have you had enough sleep?’

Recognition coats her eyes as she turns her head back to the drawer, her feet grace the floor as she starts to move closer and closer.

‘What are you doing?’

She doesn’t halt her steps; her stomps grow louder, as she makes her way to the drawer and yanks it open. There’s an aggression behind her, a bolstering urge to see what’s inside that draw. He glances towards her, as the drawer opens again. This time, she ravages forward. Her hand moves faster than he has ever seen, filtering through the files and shaking her head at each one. Disappointment painted all over her.

‘Jane, stop.’

His hands reach out, covering hers, physically forcing her to stop. If she were to continue the files would be corrupted; they could lose everything.

‘I have to find it, Mr Peterson.’

Her eyes flicker to him and back to the drawer. He can’t shake the feeling that she knows something, that maybe she isn’t as reserved or sweet as she’s painted herself out to be. Her mousy brown hair falls over her face, hiding her from him. He can’t read her; she’s not letting him in. She snaps her hands out of his hold, turning her body away from him, and goes straight back to the files. This time she is moving even faster, shoving the files back and forth from each other. She is basically in the drawer, and she grows even more and more impatient with not finding the file.

‘Jane, you’re going to destroy those files.’ Anger shoots out from him, his work at risk in her hands.

‘Screw those files, they don’t matter.’

‘It’s my work!’

‘Your work isn’t going to matter if the world doesn’t exist, Dan.’

Everything stops the minute those words leave her mouth; she’s just admitted to seeing the same video he was watching before she entered the lab.

‘What are you trying to say?’

‘It was a figure of speech, Dan, forget I said it.’

‘No. I won’t. Tell me – what’s going on?’

She ignores him and continues in her frenzied search. She flings open more drawers, checking his desks and rooting through the shelving around the room. It’s like she forgets that he is in the room too; she is so caught up in what she is looking for that everything else around her ceases to exist. As he watches her manic search he makes his way back towards his laptop. His steps are calculated, and his gaze never leaves Jane.

He reaches his laptop and reaches to open it. He knows that when he opens that laptop, he is going to see everything all over again, and he doesn’t know if he could bear it. The rummaging stops, as his eyes catch Jane’s face, shrunken in disappointment and sorrow. Seeing her face makes him impulsively open the laptop without a second thought and the sound of screams, building collapsing and the fire blazing shoot out instantly. Her eyes stay locked on his face as she watches to see his reaction; his face stays calm and calculated whilst staring directly back. He notices tears dripping down her cheeks as she realises, Dr Peterson had the file all along.

‘You knew?’ her voice shakes out.

‘Jane—’ he tries to explain.

‘You knew this whole time and didn’t think to tell me,’

she shouts.

‘So, you were looking for this file?’

Her chest is raising increasingly faster every second; her fingers pick at each other, tearing away at skin, until blood pools in her fingernails. She is crumbling, losing control over herself and everything around her. She looks unstable stood across from the desk. She feels like any minute she could just disappear from him and never return.

‘Jane, please just talk to me.’

Her head shakes as she listens to him plead. She moves herself over to an empty chair and slumps into it. Her body continues to shake as she does. It folds into itself, head down and knees up. She hugs herself, making herself smaller and shrinking with every minute that passes. He moves over towards her and kneels in front of her; he tries to get her to look him in the eye by trying to gently remove her hands from her face, but she fights against him keeping her faced hidden.

‘Jane, please.’ His voice cracks.

She continues to ignore him, as tears bloom a dark grey onto her trousers. Just as he felt when he first discovered the memory, he could only watch, and hope that maybe the peace of silence might just coax her out of her ball of security. They stay there for almost five minutes unmoving in silence. He counts the ticks of the clock. After a shaky breath he sees her lift her head and her arms come down to her sides. Her eyes lock onto his, tears still streaming down her cheeks with them glistening in the light. She takes one more massive intake of breath.

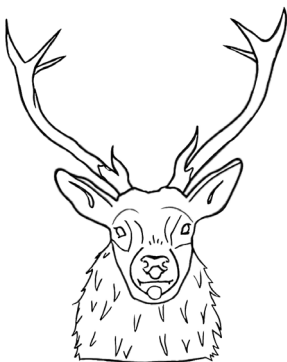
‘I don’t want to die.’

Dearly Departed

Molly McPhearson

Molly McPhearson is a writing student from Doncaster, currently studying creative writing at the University of Lincoln. She mostly focuses on gruesome and horror-centred stories, however sometimes writes more light-hearted stories as a treat. When not writing she can be found cooking or watching true crime documentaries.

Content warnings: Death, grief.



I was sitting on the back steps because the house felt too loud with my thoughts, even though nothing inside was making a sound. I hadn't cried in hours, which felt worse than crying, like something inside me had stalled and wouldn't move anymore. Mary had been dead for a week now. Not that it felt that long at all, days instead blurring into a murky grey. That's when I noticed the deer at the edge of the yard. At first, I thought it was fog arranging itself into a shape I wanted to see, grief tricking me into finding patterns where there weren't any.

But it didn't dissolve when I blinked. It stood just beyond the reach of the porch light, its fur catching the mist in a way that made it look wet, newly formed, each hair slicked down and gleaming as if brushed by careful hands. The deer didn't lower its head to graze or tense itself ready to run. It simply stood there, upright, calm, watching me with unblinking eyes. I waited for the familiar snap of instinct, the sudden fright, the reminder that something in this world still knew how to escape. It never came. The deer held itself like a statue placed in the yard, as though it had always belonged there and I was the thing out of place. The mist curled around its legs, softening the boundary between where it ended and the night began. For the first time in days, maybe longer, I felt the strange, unsettling sensation of being seen by something that already understood exactly how tired I was.

The deer took a step forward. There was no crack of a twig or startled jerk, no alarm written into its body. It moved like the fog surrounding it: slow and intentional. One hoof lifted, placed itself down, then another, slow and precise, as if the ground had been measured in advance. I held my breath without meaning to. The night felt thin, stretched tight between us.

It came close enough that I could see the fine seam where its

chest met its neck, the way the mist gathered there and refused to fall. Its eyes never left me. There was no hunger in them, no fear, only a steady, patient attention that made my throat tighten all over again. When it reached the edge of the garden, it didn't stop. It turned, ritualising the yard. It traced the fence line first, pausing at places where the wood bowed inward, where Mary had once leaned her weight and laughed about how the whole thing would come down in a good storm. The deer lowered its head there, not to eat, just to breathe. Then it passed beneath the apple tree, stepping around the dropped fruit without disturbing it, its hooves finding empty spaces I didn't know were there. I felt like I was watching someone move through a room full of memories without touching a single one.

When my eyes burned, I finally looked away. It was only for a second; scrubbing my face with my sleeve, swallowing the ache that had risen too fast and too sharp. When I looked back, the yard was empty. There was no sound of retreat. No flash of white tail, no rustle of leaves. The fog lay as it had before, unbroken, as though nothing solid had ever stood inside it.

I stayed on the steps long after the cold soaked through my clothes, waiting for some proof that it had been real; flattened grass, a broken stem, anything. The yard offered me nothing. Hours passed before I went inside, locking the door out of habit, feeling foolish as soon as the bolt slid into place.

The next morning, I convinced myself I had imagined it. Grief does that, I told myself. It makes things where there are none. It sharpens absence until your brain tries to fill it with shape. I repeated this whilst brushing my teeth, whilst staring at the blank space on the counter where her mug still should have been. I repeated it until the words lost meaning.

I saw the deer again that afternoon, my car parked crooked on the side of the road with my hazard lights blinking because I couldn't remember the last few minutes of driving. My chest had tightened so suddenly it felt like I'd been struck. I pressed my forehead to the steering wheel and breathed her name into the vinyl. When I looked up, it stood across the road, half-hidden by tall grass. The daylight didn't make it any less strange. Its fur held that slick, dewy sheen, as if the air itself clung to it. Cars passed behind it, close enough that I flinched, but the deer never moved. It watched me through the windshield, unbothered by the noise, by the speed, by the way the world insisted on continuing. I blinked, and it was gone. Not gone like something that runs. Gone like a thought you lose between one breath and the next.

After that, the deer began to appear only when the grief swelled beyond what I could carry. When it came on like weather; sudden, oppressive, impossible to ignore. Outside my bedroom window at dawn, standing so close I could see my own warped reflection in its eye. At the far end of the grocery store parking lot when I abandoned my cart between the aisles because the cereal she liked had been on sale. Once, in the basement laundry room.

I had dragged the basket down with hands that wouldn't stop shaking, the smell of detergent too sharp, too clean. Her shirt was on top, the one she'd left at my place months ago and never taken back. I sat on the concrete floor with it pressed to my face until my ribs hurt. When I lifted my head, the washing machine door was open and inside, curled neatly among the clothes, was the deer. It fit the space as if it had been made for it. Its legs folded beneath its body, head tucked in, eyes open. The metal drum reflected its shape into a dozen soft, curved versions of itself. The hum of the basement light filled the room. I didn't scream. I didn't move.

I couldn't decide which would make it disappear faster. I reached out without standing, my fingers stopping inches short of its fur. The air felt cool and dense between us, like water. The deer's ears flicked once, not away from me but toward me, attentive. Then I blinked and the washing machine was full of clothes again, damp and tangled, the door closed.

I never saw it leave. That became the rule; the deer would appear and later it would be gone, but its leaving was something I was never allowed to witness. There was no sequence, no explanation. It was simply there until it wasn't, like her absence, like the way entire days slipped past me without my noticing.

I started to expect it. Worse, I started to rely on it. When the grief crested, when it pressed me flat and made breathing feel optional, part of me would look outward, scanning for that familiar shape. And when I found it, something in me loosened. Not because the pain lessened, but because it was being held, mirrored, acknowledged by something that did not ask me to explain.

The deer never came close enough to touch. It maintained a careful distance, close enough that I could see it, far enough that I could never confirm if it was real. If I took a step forward it did not retreat, it vanished. It was as though proximity broke a rule I didn't understand.

At night, lying in bed, I began to wonder how long it had been standing with me the first time. Whether it had arrived only when I noticed it, or whether it had been there much longer, waiting for me to look up. The thought was odd but comforting and that scared me most of all. Sometimes, just before sleep took me, I would imagine what it must be like to stand that still. To be so balanced and so unafraid of the moment passing. To be present without the burden of wanting anything more. And in that imagin-

ing, the ache in my chest would soften into something almost like relief. It was thin and fragile but real enough that I held onto it as tight as I could.

I drove over to her mother's house on a Tuesday afternoon because Tuesdays felt neutral enough to survive. The sky was the colour of unwashed linen, low and heavy, and I kept expecting the deer to appear at the shoulder of the road as I went. It didn't. The absence felt deliberate, like privacy.

Her mother answered the door with the same careful smile she'd been wearing since the funeral, the one that looked like it had been practised in a mirror until it stopped trembling. The house smelt of lemon cleaner and something burnt in the kitchen. Everything inside it had been arranged into stillness. We sat at the kitchen table with mugs of tea growing cold between us. We talked about the small things first. Work. Weather. How the neighbours' dog kept getting loose. We circled the larger absence as if it might lash out if approached head-on. It rose anyway, heavy and unavoidable, pressing its way between us.

I don't know why I told her about the deer. Maybe because I needed it to be something other than mine. Maybe because I wanted someone else to confirm it meant something kind.

'I keep seeing it,' I said, staring at the wood grain on the table. 'A deer. It shows up when it gets bad. When I miss her too much.'

Her mother's brow furrowed, not in alarm, but concentration. She waited, the way people do when they don't want to interrupt grief, and I found myself filling the silence.

'I thought maybe,' I start, hating how small my voice sounded, 'it's her. Or something from her. A sign.'

The word felt flimsy the moment it left my mouth.

Her mother reached for her mug but didn't lift it. Instead, her

hands shook. 'I haven't seen anything like that,' she murmured. 'I keep hoping I will. Anything, really.' She smiled, brittle at the edges. 'But no. Just dreams. And even those are fading.'

Something in me tightened. Not disappointment, more like the quiet acceptance that this, too, belonged only to me. I nodded, ashamed of the relief that crept alongside the loss. If the deer wasn't a sign then it wasn't something I had to share. It could remain intact.

When I left, she hugged me for a long time, her cheek cool against mine. 'You're doing your best,' she said, as if it were fact rather than hope. I didn't correct her. The deer was waiting across the street when I stepped outside. It stood in the shadow of a maple tree, half-obsured by its trunk but unmistakable. The afternoon light slid over its fur without ever quite settling. It watched me with the same patient attention, as though it had been listening through the walls. I didn't point it out. I didn't say goodbye. I walked to my car and drove away without looking back, certain that if I did, it would be gone.

It began appearing more often after that.

Not just at the edges of grief but woven through the hours of the day. Standing in the alley behind my office when I stepped out to breathe through a panic attack that had arrived without warning. Reflected in the dark glass of a bus shelter whilst rain stitched the street together. Once it appeared at the end of the hallway at work, aligned with the exit sign, its body haloed in green light. I learned to move as if it might be watching at any moment. To hold myself a little straighter. To breathe slower. It never reacted to me, never signalled approval or concern. It simply was, and in its presence the sharpest edges of the world dulled. I went back to routines because routines are what people recommend when grief becomes

unmanageable. I returned to work full-time. I cooked meals that made leftovers. I answered messages days late but answered them all the same. The deer accompanied me through these things, a constant that required nothing.

Days passed. Weeks. The grief changed texture. It didn't lessen; it reorganised itself. It learned new places to settle. I found myself thinking of the deer before I thought of her sometimes, and the guilt that followed was sharp and brief.

Once, whilst washing my hands in a public restroom, I caught sight of it behind me in the mirror. The fluorescent lights flattened everything, but the deer remained dimensional, resisting the room. I turned. It wasn't there. My reflection looked thinner than I remembered. I began to wonder if others had noticed changes in me. If I moved differently. If my stillness had started to resemble its own. The deer appeared even when I wasn't actively hurting now, when the grief hummed at a low, constant pitch instead of roaring. As if it were checking in. As if proximity alone was enough.

One evening, standing at the kitchen sink and watching the sky deepen into blue, I felt the grief swell without warning. Not sharp. Not loud. Just vast. I closed my eyes and leaned into the counter. When I opened them, the deer stood in the opening in the garden.

The anger came on suddenly, sharp enough to startle me. The deer stood close enough that I could see the slow rise and fall of its chest, the calm persistence of it. I was exhausted of the waiting, of the quiet witnessing, of carrying my grief like a thing that refused to rot or heal. The deer's presence no longer felt like mercy. It felt like surveillance. Like being reminded over and over of a wound that would not close.

'Go away,' I said, my voice cracking against the night. The deer

did not move.

Something hot and reckless surged through me. Before I could think better of it, I bent and snatched up a broken branch from the ground, hurling it. It clattered against the fence, nowhere near the deer. My chest heaved. The sound felt good; violent, inelegant proof that I was still capable of making noise. The deer took a step back. The motion snapped something loose inside me. I lunged forwards, shouting, grabbing the branch again and raising it like a weapon, swinging through empty air.

‘I’m done.’

I didn’t know if I was telling the deer or myself.

‘I’m done with this.’

The deer turned and ran. It did not bolt in panic. It moved with that same unhurried certainty, slipping between the apple trees and past the broken fence, toward the dark line of forest pressed up against the back of the property. I chased it without stopping to think. My feet slipped on wet grass. My lungs burned. The branch fell from my hand somewhere behind me but I didn’t go back for it. I needed the deer gone.

The forest swallowed us. The ground dipped and rose, roots snaring my steps, branches scraping at my arms. The deer stayed just in front of me, never far enough to lose, never close enough to catch. Fog thickened between the trees, cool and damp against my skin, and the world narrowed to breath and motion and the pale flash of its body slipping through shadows.

I shouted again, wordless this time, rage tearing its way out of my throat. The sound startled birds into the air. The deer did not look back.

The deeper we went, the quieter everything became. My footsteps softened. The pain in my chest dulled, then spread, a

warm ache that seemed to radiate outward. The anger thinned and stretched, losing its edge. I became aware of my body in fragments, my hands burning, my legs moving with a rhythm that felt less like effort and more like a memory. I stumbled, catching myself on a tree trunk slick with moss. When I pushed off, my palm left no print. I frowned, distracted, then lurched forward again as the deer paused at the edge of a clearing. It stood there, mist curling around its legs, waiting.

I slowed. My breath came easier than it should have. The forest smelled green and deep and unbearably alive. The ache in my chest shifted and spread downward, outward. My heart felt too large, beating low and steady. I took a step and nearly fell, the ground tilting beneath me. My balance was wrong. I looked down.

The sight didn't frighten me, not the way it should have. My hands were gone, replaced by something darker, slimmer, ending in delicate, cloven shapes pressed into the leaf-littered earth. My legs were longer than they had been, bent differently, built for distance rather than weight. I tried to scream and instead released a soft, startled sound that vibrated through my chest. The deer stood. Watching. Waiting.

Understanding arrived not as a thought, but as a release. The anger drained away, leaving behind something vast and quiet. The grief was still there but it no longer cut. It settled into my body and distributed itself the way water finds its level.

I did not remember falling; I only remembered standing. The forest moved around me, familiar and intimate. Sounds layered themselves; winds through leaves, the distant rush of something alive and unseen. My senses stretched, sharpened. I could feel the space between trees, the open paths and the closed ones. The other deer stepped forwards, brushing past me, its flank warm and solid, and in that contact, something completed itself. There was no

struggle after that. No panic. I followed.

We moved through the woods together, our steps synchronised without effort, the fog thinning as the trees gave way to open land. The world felt balanced again, arranged correctly. Time loosened its grip. I walked, or ran, or simply existed in motion, until the forest fell away and a garden took its place.

I knew this garden.

The fence bowed inward at the same weak points. The apple tree leaned to the left. The porch light cast a familiar cone of warmth over the back steps. A young man sat there, hunched forward, elbows on his knees, his face buried in his hands.

He looked tired. I stopped at the edge of the yard.

The other deer was gone, or perhaps it had never been separate from me at all. Mist gathered at my legs, cool and soft. I stood very still. Stillness came easily now. It felt like the most natural thing in the world.

The young man shifted, dragging his hands down his face. He stared at the ground for a long moment, then lifted his head. Our eyes met. Recognition passed between us, not of faces but of weight. I saw the grief in him, raw and immediate, the way mine once had been. I saw the moment he was standing in; how close he was to giving in to the quiet beneath everything. I did not move toward him. I did not run.

I stood, balanced and calm, letting him see me clearly. Letting him take in the sheen of my fur, the way the mist clung to me, the certainty of my presence. I waited, patient as the forest, as the night, as the slow turning of all things towards rest. He held my gaze, breath hitching, and for the first time since he sat down, something in him eased.

I remained where I was.

I would be here when he needed me again.

Death is a Cat

Megan Kite

Megan Kite is a British writer from Hertfordshire, studying at the University of Lincoln. She is working on her first novel, whilst also submitting to various writing competitions. When not writing, she can be found with a crochet hook and wool, getting in touch with her other creative side.

Content warnings: Death.



Clouds closed in on the warming sky, bringing yet another hazy day to the town of Pennymore. It was quiet. People walked around doing nothing much, talking to nobody in particular, and eating meals that were too bland to comment on.

It was boring and safe. A perfect day.

Everyone in Pennymore knew one another. Faye, the baker's daughter, was dating Michael, the blacksmith's apprentice. Charlotte's children were three of twelve in the small primary school; Charlotte's husband was the only teacher there. The town had a population of thirty-six. Recently, however, Leo had curled up on Gwyneth's lap, and Dotty was heavily pregnant with her fourth child. The town's population would soon go up to thirty-seven then back down to thirty-six, all in the next few days.

Gwyneth's funeral was being planned. She'd picked out the flowers already.

She had told Dotty not to mourn her when she went, only to celebrate her child. Mourning could happen now, while she still graced this earth. That was the blessing of Leo.

Once the clouds had completely covered the sky, Michael snuck out onto the streets, making use of this exceptionally sluggish day to visit his girl. She was waiting for him at the bandstand in the centre of town. Usually, all eyes would be on them, but it was nightfall and everyone was asleep. They had a rare moment of privacy, and they were intent on using it.

Faye stood with her back to him, hands clutching the wooden railing – the one he had told her not to hold too hard in case she got splinters. Her brown hair fell messily down her back, with specks of flour in it from working all day. She heard his footsteps but didn't turn around. Not even when two hands wrapped around her waist.

‘Is this one a surprise to you?’ she asked him, her soft voice taken away by the breeze.

‘No. She’s very old,’ Michael replied.

‘They always are. It still surprises me.’

‘Leo, or death?’ he asked.

‘Both. They’re interchangeable. You can’t have one without the other,’ Faye said.

She turned around in his arms, her back against the railing now. Her hands pressed against his cotton shirt, and she stared up at him. The town slept peacefully around them.

‘You don’t like that cat,’ Michael pointed out, an obvious fact. Most of the town didn’t like that cat. He brought bad news and funerals, then tried to soften the blow with a quiet purr.

‘I hate him,’ Faye agreed.

Leo was a tabby cat with no real owner. He was the towns’ cat, fed by the good of heart, or those who tried to please him because they worried he was sent by the devil himself. He drifted from house to house, bakery to blacksmith, school to church. The children would squeal with delight when they saw him, eager to pet him but stopped by their parents’ fearful hands. They were told that Leo was dirty and could give them a disease. When they were older, they were told that Leo meant death – passing on to the next life without a care for the one you were leaving behind.

It had been happening long before any of the current residents of Pennymore were born. Leo would pay particular attention to a resident, sitting on their lap and purring the sweet melodies of death. They would pet him and love him and do anything they could to reverse the curse.

They were always dead within the week.

Nobody knew how old Leo was, or where he came from. All

they knew was that he disrupted their small-town peace and he was a bad omen they were never going to get rid of. Their elderly could not be protected (as it was always the elderly Leo chose). It was simply a well-known fact that one day, you were chosen. One day, you got your sentence.

‘I don’t think he’s all bad,’ Michael said, hands caressing Faye’s back as he leant forwards. She frowned and didn’t meet his eye.

‘He took my grandpa,’ she said, stiffening in his arms.

‘I know. But your grandpa was very sick, Faye,’ Michael said, his hands stopping in their tracks. She stepped away from him and folded her arms over her chest.

‘He was getting better.’

Michael knew this wasn’t a fight he was going to win. Faye’s opinion was one shared by the majority of the town’s people, he was outnumbered. Instead, he took her hand, pulled her in, and kissed her.

‘I love you,’ he said, hoping to turn the evening around.

Faye kissed him back, before stepping away.

‘You too. Come to the bakery tomorrow. I’m in charge of the pastries for Gwyneth’s funeral so I won’t have time to visit you.’

Michael watched her walk away, arms hugged in front of her instead of their usual swaying motion as she fluttered around town.

‘I’ll be there!’ he called after her.

Faye didn’t turn back.

Her small hand brushed through his fur carefully, fingers caressing the skin beneath it. That’s all he was, really. Skin and fur and two pointed ears. Claws that dug into you when you touched that spot under his chin. A mouth that purred the whole day long.

Gwyneth used to fear this day, when Leo would choose her lap to sit on. Back when she was younger, spritelier, and fuller of life. She shied away from him with the rest of the townspeople.

Now her hand was smaller. Curled halfway into a fist, stuck that way from her old joints and arthritis. Her skin was paper-thin, showing every single blue raised vein. She couldn't do much with these hands anymore, apart from stroke Leo. Letting him know that she didn't blame him for sitting on her lap or for choosing her to go next. She was ready. In fact, she quite appreciated the heads up.

The door to her downstairs room creaked open and she looked up to see her daughter, Mary, standing there. She was in her thirties and best friends with Dotty, who was the pregnant woman next door. She looked down at the tabby cat sitting on Gwyneth's lap. Her nose crinkled with a barely disguised disgust.

'The funeral director has called. He wants to know what music you'd like to be played,' she said. When she spoke, she didn't address her mother. She kept her eyes very firmly away.

'I want you to play the piano. You play so beautifully,' Gwyneth said. She saw the tears spring to her daughter's eyes, making her gaze appear even more distant. 'Look at me, Mary.'

'I'll let him know,' was the choked reply, as Mary turned and walked out of the room. Gwyneth continued to stroke Leo.

The pastries were flavoured with cinnamon and clove, a favourite in Pennymore. Faye took her time twisting the dough, arranging it in neat knots and sliding it into the oven. Her father always said the funeral treats were the ones that most time should be dedicated to. When Gwyneth came to approve them, she should feel the love

poured into every bite.

Faye drizzled sticky honey over the tops of the buns, popping a finger into her mouth and sucking the sweet stuff off. She was unaware of a boy watching her, a small lovestruck smile on his face.

‘They look delicious,’ Michael said, making Faye jump a little as she turned around. Seeing who it was she relaxed, tucking her hair behind her ears.

‘It’s what she deserved,’ she said.

‘She’s still alive, Faye,’ he murmured.

Faye shrugged, untying her apron.

‘That thing sat on her lap says the opposite. The more I think about it, the angrier I get. Who does he think he is, telling us when we’re going to die?’ She chucked her apron onto the sugar dusted counter. Michael picked it up and hung it on the back of the door.

‘We already know we’re going to die someday. He just gives us a heads up,’ he said.

Faye didn’t have a response. The oven timer dinged and she took her pastries out.

‘Breathe, Dotty, just breathe.’

The white room was filled with chaos; nurses rushing around, machines beeping, the constant swish of fabric as a curtain was pulled back and forth. Dotty lay on the bed, a sheen of sweat covering her forehead, her clammy hand gripping her husband’s. He muttered encouragements from her side though he looked faint himself.

Suddenly, it all stopped. The nurses froze and the beeping calmed. Dotty watched hopefully as two blue gloved hands cradled

a baby, turning it to face her. Her baby girl.

‘She’s beautiful,’ she said, tears falling down her face.

But the room was silent. Too silent. Eerily quiet and wrong. Then a scrape of a chair sounded as her husband stood up.

‘Why isn’t she crying?’

Gwyneth had grown very weak in a short amount of time. She couldn’t eat anymore; she could hardly move. Her hand worked hard to stroke Leo, the constant soothing presence on her lap. She knew her time was near. She wasn’t in any pain, simply waiting and fighting to stay a bit longer. There was someone she needed to say goodbye to.

Mary walked into the room, her footsteps louder than usual, thudding across the bare wood floor.

‘Dotty had her baby,’ she said. ‘She’s very ill.’

‘The baby?’ Gwyneth asked. Mary nodded. A bittersweet smile spread across Gwyneth’s cracked lips, and she nodded. ‘Then it’s time for me to say goodbye.’

‘No,’ Mary refused, shaking her head.

‘Yes, dear. It’s time for me to go.’

Mary wouldn’t accept this. Gwyneth knew her daughter was a stubborn woman, and that even a cat who had predicted the fate of all others in the town wouldn’t convince her that her Mum needed to die. She also knew that Leo didn’t choose young people, especially not those who had just opened their eyes to the world. No, she had been chosen instead. She knew it was between her and that small, helpless child. Really, there was no choice.

The town's doctor drifted between rooms, between bodies. One very small and sick, the other frail and unconscious, both barely holding on. Gwyneth's breathing was laboured, coming out in short gasps. She had the fight of a younger woman trapped in an older body.

Her daughter held her hand, clung to it as though it would keep her soul tethered to this world. She ignored the beeping of the machines. She acted as though she wasn't in a hospital at all.

'I'm very sorry, Mary. I believe she will pass in the next day or so,' the doctor told her, with a soft pat on her shoulder. Mary ignored him. 'She's fighting to stay. Perhaps if you talk to her, she will find it easier to let go.'

Mary looked up and watched the doctor leave the room, heading next door to tend to the sick baby. She glanced at her mother and the closed eyes she knew would never open again.

'Mum?' she whispered. Gwyneth responded with a short gasp, her hand jerking, reaching out for Leo. He edged closer, pushing his forehead against her palm. Gwyneth's breathing calmed.

Mary knew who Gwyneth was fighting for. She knew what she wanted and what she had to do. So, she closed her eyes and pressed a soft kiss to her Mum's wrinkled cheek.

'Goodbye, Mum. I love you.'

Leo nudged his nose against a swollen knuckle, before jumping off the bed and slinking out of the room.

Mary's cries could be heard above the slowing beeps of a machine.

Gwyneth's coffin was covered in lavender, the purple highlighted in a sea of black. Mary stood at the front of the crowd, her face

shrouded in black lace, pointed towards the floor. A distant look glazed over her eyes. Silent tears poured down her face.

Dotty cradled her newborn baby, whose cheeks were now pink and full of life. She understood that a sacrifice had been made. She thanked Gwyneth now.

Leo slunk through the crowd, rubbing his head against legs, his mewling hidden amongst the soft cries. The town watched as he circled Gwyneth's coffin, purring and licking his paw. Then he walked off into the trees, watching from a distance instead.

Faye rested her head on Michael's shoulders.

'We all got to say goodbye,' he murmured. She nodded, wiping a stray tear off her cheek.

'I'm glad the baby's okay. I'm glad Gwyneth knew what to do.'

'That's because of that damn cat,' Michael pointed out, and Faye smiled softly.

'I know.'

Quietness fell upon the town. Pennymore grieved differently from other places. It mourned softly, without too much fuss. The residents were allowed to say their goodbyes in peace. Death didn't surprise them. It wasn't a cape covered omen, brandishing a scythe and sending people to their dooms.

It was a cat. Death came with a purr and a meow, and it was as painless as could be.

Leo watched the coffin get lowered into the ground. Then he curled up under a tree, letting the town rest. A bell clanged; a baby cried. Night fell on Pennymore.

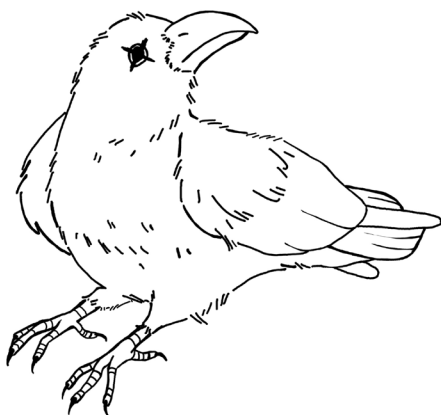
And it was good.

The Raven's Eye

Thaddeus Boyns

Thaddeus Boyns is an English fantasy writer based in Lincoln. Currently studying Creative Writing at the University of Lincoln, his work has been featured in an anthology collated by Young Writers. When not writing, which isn't very often, he can usually be found arm-deep in a Lego set.

Content warnings: Mild gore, blood.



Odessa barely made it onto the plateau before her knees gave out. Her makeshift cane clattered to the ground and she collapsed onto all fours, gasping for breath. The stitch in her side throbbed.

Below her, the wildwoods stretched out from the foothills of the mountain like a sprawling evergreen blanket, the blurry shapes of birds darting in and out of the canopy. Above her, the mountains loomed, claws of a furious beast scraping at the heavens. Above even that, the clouds hung thick and dark, only a few beams of the fading evening sunlight piercing through the tattered grey cloak. The wind rushed down from the mountains, howling like a wild thing, and Odessa shivered in cold and fear.

She'd hoped to take refuge in the wildwoods. For all their danger, they were full of food, shelter, and weren't unlike the woods she'd grown up in with Father. She would've been able to survive there until she was ready to flee the kingdom. Unfortunately, it seemed her former mistress had thought of that. Like everywhere else she'd been since fleeing, the wildwoods were crawling with the king's men, hunting down who they thought was a treasonous assassin.

Odessa had been driven away from every safe place she might have found, up into these barren mountains. Her cuts had only just scabbed over that morning. She couldn't even be angry at the man who'd thrown the spear; she knew from experience how easily Acrasia could sway people to do her bidding.

Still, she had to keep moving. The mountains were inhospitable, but a witch like herself could navigate them better than an ordinary man. If she could only survive up there, they would keep her safe from Acrasia's unwitting minions. Perhaps she could shelter there until the search was off, then flee to other lands?

No. That was a foolish hope. The ingredients in her bag were

far too powerful and far too valuable for Acrasia to let them slip through her fingers. Unfortunately, that meant they were also too powerful for Odessa to let the greedy sorceress have. She saw the future, laid out as an unerring path in her mind's eye – Acrasia would hunt her to the ends of the earth, and Odessa would never be able to stop running.

Fear, not hope, was what drove her to clutch her cane and try to push herself back to her feet. Fear pushed her exhausted body to keep moving even as it pleaded for rest. She stumbled forward across the plateau, towards the next part of the punishing climb. She sucked down air through gritted teeth and an aching chest; if she stopped, she was afraid she wouldn't be able to start again.

She also needed to distract herself from the growing hopelessness churning in her gut. Her brothers were still lost – her father hadn't known where they were, and the world was too vast for her to search in a lifetime. Acrasia had been her only lead, promising to scry for them as soon as Odessa completed the tasks she had set. But at the moment of the sorceress' betrayal, Odessa realised she had never intended to keep that bargain. She'd just found a string and pulled it. Now she had nothing. Her beloved brothers, vanished when she was a child, were now lost to her forever.

What was the point in carrying on?

Pain and exhaustion made her body leaden. Guilt and despair clutched at her heart, sapping her strength even further. Hot tears of self-loathing dripped down her cheeks. 'Stupid,' she whispered, her voice hoarse. 'How could I have been so stupid?'

She should have stayed with her father. He'd been a good man, if a gruff one, but she'd all but disowned him once she learned he was the reason her brothers had vanished. He had begged to help her, to atone for his error in cursing his sons, but she'd refused.

Acrasia had been right there as soon as she entered the capital, whispering honeyed words into her ear, giving her a new home and smoothing out any obstacles in her path. Who would say no to the king's beautiful sorceress, after all? She was a bloated spider matriarch spinning her web, and Odessa, ever the fool, had stumbled right into it.

Her legs gave out, the spearing pain in her side too much to handle. Her cane clattered to the ground, and she collapsed against the rocky slope at the other side of the plateau, sobbing. It was over. She couldn't go on, night was falling, and her provisions were nearly exhausted. She was going to die here.

Her brothers – Hugo, Matt, Gerald, Fredric, Sven, Vincent, Victor – she would never see them again. Wherever they were, she hoped they were okay. She hoped they would never learn what had happened to their foolish little sister.

With the last of her strength, Odessa rolled onto her back, looking up into the cold grey sky. The daylight was fading, just like her. She managed a small smile at the irony.

A harsh caw drifted down from above, echoed by a chorus of others. Seven black spots that had been circling high above began to drift lower, spiralling around each other. The closer they got to the ground, the more features Odessa could make out; feathers and beaks and talons, and beady, intelligent eyes. Ravens.

Ravens had always liked her. After her brothers had vanished, a raven had never been far from her, always perched two trees away, watching her with its keen gaze. Her father had told her they were wise birds, and they paid special attention to those with magic in their blood. She'd always thought of them as her protectors. Perhaps now she could give something back to them. Ravens were carrion birds, after all.

As consciousness slipped away from her, Odessa fancied she could hear worry in the ravens' caws.

Odessa woke to the sound of a crackling fire.

Strange. Everything she'd ever read about the underworld said it was a place of biting cold, but she was warm. Her heart was still heavy, her body still ached – though less than when she'd passed out – but the creeping chill of death was nowhere to be felt. What was going on?

Nearby, a raven cawed. Feathers brushed against her hand. Odessa opened her eyes, groaning. Then she shut them and opened them again, to check if she was seeing things.

She wasn't. The ravens from earlier – seven of them, all large and healthy birds – were hopping around a campfire, assembled with painstaking care. As she watched, one of them tossed a few more sticks onto the blaze. Beside her lay two bowls, one full of haphazardly cooked meat strips, the other full of clean water.

One of the ravens hopped over to her. It was not the biggest of the group, but it seemed to be in charge, since the others kept looking at it as they went about their tasks. It was a handsome bird, with a glossy purple sheen to the edges of its feathers. It nudged the bowls with its beak, cawing at her.

Odessa had been ready for death but, now that a way out was in front of her, she wouldn't refuse escape. She drank from the water bowl first, sighing as it soothed her throat. Then she gorged herself on the meat – it was crispy around the edges, but given the ravens had cooked it themselves, she thought they'd done a good job.

Only when both bowls were empty did she finally speak.

‘Thank you,’ she said to the lead raven. ‘But... why do this for me?’

The raven made no sound, meeting her eyes with its own. These were not normal ravens, Odessa was certain of that. No normal ravens could make a fire or cook meat, and none would do it to save a wandering human’s life. Perhaps magic ran in their blood too?

‘Can you understand me?’ Odessa asked.

The raven nodded.

Odessa’s eyes widened with wonder. Just for a moment, she was that cheerful young girl coming into her magic again, awed by everything she could see and do, before dark truths and lies had ground her down. It was freeing to feel that childlike awe again.

Ravens were wise birds and could fly great distances. How much farther could magical ravens go?

Odessa sat up in a sudden flurry of movement. The ravens flapped their wings and squawked with surprise, but she paid them no heed. Just when she thought she’d lost all hope of finding her brothers it had come to her on black-feathered wings again. She pulled her journal from her bag and flipped through its pages, pointing out a recipe to the lead raven.

‘I need to make this,’ she said. ‘And I need these things. Can you get them?’

The raven nodded, and turned to its fellows, cawing orders. The biggest of the ravens grabbed the former water bowl in its talons and flapped off into the night, tailed by two identical birds.

Odessa set to work. Her side still throbbed and her head hurt, but she had hope and a plan. That gave her all the energy she needed. She set up a stand over the campfire with sticks the ravens had gathered and pulled herbs and bone chips from her bag. The lead raven offered her his wing. She pulled three loose feathers from it,

beginning to cut them evenly with her knife.

Soon, the three ravens returned with mushrooms, flowers and the refilled water bowl in tow. Odessa set it on the stand and let it boil, preparing her ingredients in silence.

A Beastspeech potion was a simple thing to brew, once you knew what you were doing. She ground up the herbs and flowers with mortar and pestle, mixing them in as the water boiled. The mushrooms were diced up and sprinkled in with the feather pieces. For the final touch, she pricked her own finger with the knife and let her blood drip into the brewing potion.

I spill this blood for my brothers, Odessa thought.

The potion hissed and spat as the mixing finished, darkening to the same glossy black as the ravens' feathers. Odessa nodded, proud of herself. 'Each of you, take a sip.'

The ravens obeyed. Once they had all dipped their beaks into the potion, Odessa drank the remains herself. It was thick and mercifully tasteless, but it still made her cough harshly as it went down. She fancied her coughs sounded a little like a raven's caw. She cleared her throat, wiping her lips with the back of her hand. Now was the moment of truth. 'Did it work?'

The lead raven gave a bone-deep sigh, its eyes shining. 'Yes. It did.' His voice was deep and hoarse, but unmistakably relieved. 'Thank you, Odessa. We've been waiting years to speak with you again.'

'Again?' Odessa sat up straighter, eyes narrowing. 'Have we met before?'

'Many times,' said the smallest raven. 'Don't you remember? Your watchers?'

'The ravens who followed me after my brothers vanished... it was you? For all those years?'

‘And before even that,’ a battle-scarred raven agreed. ‘Since the day you were born. The day our hearts were no longer our own.’

Something hot knotted in Odessa’s chest. ‘You were there? You saw me then? How?’

The battle-scarred raven scratched his leg, marked by a faded scar. Gerald had had a scar there from when he tripped on a rock while catching her after a fall. ‘We had to be. You were as precious to us as you were to Mother and Father.’

The biggest raven shuffled in place, tucking his wings behind him. Sven had always kept his arms folded behind him, making himself smaller so he wouldn’t scare her. ‘We never wanted to leave you, Odessa. Despite what Father thought, we never did. We were always watching over you.’

Tears beaded in Odessa’s eyes, a knot of emotion swelling inside her. ‘I looked everywhere for you... Everything I did, every trick and trap I’ve been dumb enough to fall for, I,’ she stifled a cry, ‘I did it to find you!’

The smallest raven laid a wing on her knee. Matt had always put his hand on her knee when he explained something to her. ‘Don’t you see, Odessa? You never lost us.’

The lead raven – Hugo, her eldest brother – smiled at her despite his beak. ‘We’ve missed you, little sister.’

The floodgates broke. Odessa sobbed and threw her arms around Hugo, hugging him fiercely against her chest. She felt his wings wrap around her as he settled his head on her shoulder and her tears flowed faster, unravelling in pure catharsis. One by one, her other brothers joined the hug until she was hardly visible beneath their soft black feathers. She wouldn’t have it any other way.

‘I missed you all, too,’ she choked out through her cries.

The fear and despair finally unravelled, and she relaxed into her brothers' wings. Finally, she was home.

Odessa woke in a much better mood the next morning. With her brothers by her side again, the fog of melancholy that had surrounded her since they vanished had lifted. She felt better than she had in years; even her wounds seemed to hurt less. Her raven brothers fussed and fretted over her, and she indulged them for a while, but before long she was ready for the climb.

The mountains were far less intimidating in the full light of day and her new companions made the climb even easier. Vincent and Victor, the twins, scouted ahead while Gerald and Fredrick stood guard on either side. They hadn't seen any predators but Hugo insisted on leaving nothing to chance. He himself was perched on her shoulder, still cawing orders.

'How long have you been like this?' Odessa asked as she inched along a narrow ledge. Sven, Gerald and Fredrick hovered close by, ready to pull her back if she slipped.

'A decade,' Hugo replied. 'Maybe a little more now. It's not a *bad* life, all things considered. I'll miss flying if we ever get cured.'

'Why did Father curse you in the first place?'

Hugo gave her an incredulous look. 'He didn't tell you?'

'He didn't tell me a lot of things,' Odessa grumbled.

'It was just after your menses began,' Matt explained, dropping down to fly beside her. His sharp mind was coordinating their route, easier from higher up. 'Father sent us to find herbs that would relieve your pain but when we got there, merchants had uprooted everything. We tried to find them elsewhere, but...' He sighed. 'I suppose we must have taken too long, because Father thought we had abandoned you and him.'

‘And he never uncursed you?’

‘Father’s mind and magic aren’t what they used to be. He didn’t realise until too late that he couldn’t remove it.’

If Odessa ever saw their father again, she was going to give him a firm kick upside the head. For now, she chanced reaching out to stroke Matt’s back feathers. ‘You did your best, Matt. It wasn’t your fault.’

Sven and Gerald’s beaks clattered in panic and they raced over to push her shoulder back against the mountainside. Odessa let it happen. They had ten years and change of mother-henning to catch up on, after all.

‘We know,’ Matt assured her. ‘But it’s nice to hear it from you, all the same.’

‘What about you?’ Fredrick asked. ‘What did that witch want from you? We got as close as we could, but the wards around her workshop repelled us.’”

Odessa sighed, averting her eyes. ‘She was teaching me magic – I wouldn’t be alive without what she taught me, honestly. But I only went to her because I wanted her to help me find you. She said she would after I found three spell ingredients for her.’

‘So that was why you went on those quests,’ Matt said.

‘You went to a dragon’s lair and the Faewoods for our sake?’ Hugo screeched.

‘A dragon scale and a fairy ring mushroom were two of the things she wanted.’ The dragon scale should’ve been her first clue that she was being used. Those were infamous as ingredients in empowering spells. ‘She hadn’t managed to figure out what ‘ultimate sacrifice’ was before she turned on me.’

‘Never do that again,’ Gerald ordered. ‘Not even for us.’

‘I’d do anything for you all. You’re my brothers; you pro-

tect me, and I protect you. That's what family should be.' Odessa stepped back onto a wider path and allowed herself to relax. 'And I don't plan to sneak up on any more dragons.'

'Thank the gods,' Sven muttered.

Presently, the twins returned from scouting. 'There's a cave not far ahead,' Vincent reported. 'Might be good for a rest, but...'

'But what?' Hugo demanded.

'There's something strange about it,' Victor finished. 'It feels ancient, and it has its own light.'

Odessa smiled, intrigued. 'Its own light, you say?'

The tunnel to the cave was big enough for two people to walk side by side. It was lit from the far end by a flowing, pale blue light. Odessa brushed aside a curtain of moss hanging from the entrance, and gasped. A mountain spring, its water a bright crystal blue, babbled at the back of the cave, lit by glow worms clinging to the ceiling. Odessa crouched down beside it, her eyes shining with wonder. Unspoiled places like this always had a magic all their own.

'Well, well, well,' Hugo murmured, hopping down off her shoulder. 'Would you look at that?'

The rest of Odessa's raven brothers flapped over, blurrily reflected in the water.

'They say,' Matt said, 'that a drink from the water of a mountain spring like this makes the drinker wise.'

'They say a lot,' Sven retorted, 'and not a lot of it is true.' He dropped Odessa's bag and cane on the floor.

There was a *clink* as the dragon scale within hit the rocks.

The realisation hit Odessa like a thunderclap. She pulled out her notebook, flipping through the pages to the very back. Her curiosity sometimes led her to break down spells in her free time, figuring out why certain ingredients were needed.

Acrasia's empowering spell had always felt incomplete to her. A dragon scale was for power, obviously. 'Ultimate sacrifice' was humility. The fairy ring mushroom had stumped her but, after her own encounter, she could say that taking from the fae was not for the faint of heart, so that was bravery. But something had been missing... and now she knew what. What good were those things if you didn't know how to use them? The spell needed wisdom.

Odessa opened her bag and pulled out the ingredients.

'Sister?' Hugo asked. 'What are you doing?'

'Making a spell.'

The dragon scale was tough but she ground it into powder with her pestle and sprinkled the dust into the spring. The change was immediate; the water shone bright red and simmered with heat.

Her brothers jumped back in alarm. 'Odessa, what are you doing?' Matt cried.

'Father can't undo your curse, and Acrasia will never stop coming for us.' Odessa moved onto the mushroom, mashing it into paste. 'Not as long as we have these. But I can handle her and help you. All I need is more power.' She poured the white paste into the spring; the heat dissipated and the spring turned bright yellow.

Odessa closed her eyes, thinking hard. Ultimate sacrifice... what could that be?

'Power born from sacrifice is the greatest power of all,' Acrasia had told her once. It was probably the only good advice the sorceress had ever given her. But a sacrifice was given meaning by the one making it. Acrasia would betray and give up everyone around her for her goals but, because she didn't care for them, the sacrifice was meaningless. It had to be something that counted.

Odessa's hand found her knife.

She had sacrificed so much for others. She had given up her family, her time, her desires and her safety, all for nothing in the end. But her brothers had stood by her, rather than seeking out a cure for themselves. They saw her as worthy of their sacrifice.

She trusted her brothers. She raised the knife to her face.

I spill this blood for myself, Odessa thought. *I sacrifice myself to myself.*

Hugo shrieked. ‘Odessa, no!’ Her brothers swooped down on her in a cloud of black.

Too slow.

Blinding pain tore a scream from her lips. Her hand dropped the knife and flew up to stem the bleeding. Her brothers flapped around her, cawing in anger and pain.

Odessa, barely able to sit upright, dropped her eye into the spring, where it dissolved. The water turned bright, brilliant white, and the entire cave began to shake. A beam of light burst from the water and shone on her, into her one remaining eye. She screamed again, screwing her eye closed, and collapsed backwards onto the cave floor, the rumbling reverberating through her bones.

Her senses came back in waves. The frantic cawing of her brothers. The fading pain in her head. The tingling in her fingers, the humming promise of power. Odessa opened her eye and gasped, then grinned. The spell had worked – she was seeing farther and more clearly with one eye than she ever had with two.

‘Odessa!’ Hugo and Matt landed on her chest. ‘Odessa, what were you thinking? Are you alright?’

Odessa laughed, and her brothers reared back in shock. ‘I think I’m better than alright, brothers.’

She sat up and held out a hand towards her cane. She spoke a word and the wind obeyed, blowing the cane into her hand. Arcane fire burned over it, growing it into a staff fit for a royal witch.

She could see everything now, the magic in all things, the threads that linked everything together. And she could see how to pull on them. With her new staff, she stood up and held out a hand towards her brothers. She spoke a word of change, and they cawed in surprise as shadows swallowed them.

Seven young men stood before her, wrapped in raven-feather cloaks. Their expressions were pictures of shock as they felt over bodies they'd never expected to have again. Even if Odessa hadn't been the one to transform them, she'd have known who they were. They looked just like she'd imagined her brothers as adults.

'Odessa, what... what did you do?' Hugo stumbled forward, finding his footing in his new form. 'You cured us?'

'Not cured you,' Odessa corrected. 'I improved the curse. You said you didn't want to give up flying, Hugo; well, now you don't have to.'

Understanding dawned in Hugo's eyes. He furrowed his brow and shrank back into a raven, then grew back into human form again. Shouts of excitement came from the others.

'You mad genius,' Sven chuckled.

'It was simple, really,' Odessa replied. 'Thanks to Acrasia's half-a-spell, I'm more powerful than even Father was in his prime.'

'So,' said Gerald with a grin, 'what happens now?'

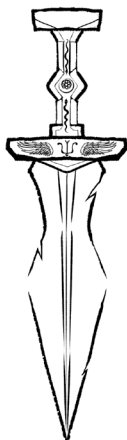
'Now?' Odessa matched his smile. 'I think we should pay my ex-mentor a visit.'

There's a War Beneath the Arena

Emily Hewlett

Emily Hewlett is a Cambridgeshire-based writer working towards a degree in Creative Writing at the University of Lincoln. She writes historical fiction with romantic elements, often based on queer historical figures. She loves writing for unspoken women through history and would rather be writing at home with her cat, Tilly.

Content warnings: Mentions of torture, death.



There was a splinter in her thumb. The small cross was held together by trembling fingers, sharp ends puncturing callused finger pads. Despite the pain it must have been causing, she kept her grip on the religious symbol as though her path to salvation depended on it. But nothing could save her in this realm as long as she kept it.

A groan came from her sleeping form. The rope tied around her forearms was creating indentations from the way it constricted. Red splotches marked the grey fabric winding around her. Her body was steeped in pain and yet she held on tight to her religion.

She rolled onto her side, her brunette curls falling over her face. Some caught on her eyelashes and obscured her marred face from onlookers for a moment. To me, her body looked broken. She looked broken. The commitment to her god was admirable, but would her God have the same for her?

The cross slipped from her hands. It fell to the ground with a thump, small splinters cracking off. Her expression was troubled, but not for letting the cross go. No, she looked angry at the world. A world in which her own gods were so ready to let her die. She may have been willing to be a martyr, but no-one would choose this suffering.

I was brought out of my thoughts by her shuffling. Her eyelids opened. Wide eyes shared her momentary panic before it settled into understanding and resentment. Her eyes flicked to mine, her pupils seeing into my soul. Jupiter could never have had the same hold she had over me.

‘Are you here to find solace in your religion by watching me die?’

I bit my cheek at her words. There was no use in arguing when she was already heading to the underworld.

‘I came to see how you were,’ I spoke in a soft tone, careful not to worsen her fear.

She looked away, her wrists shifting in their bindings. The skin underneath was a deep purple mixed with red, a mark from their treatment. Everything about her seemed offended by my presence, and I wasn't sure I blamed her. My kind had taken too much from too many for her to be sympathetic towards me. Not even I would have believed myself.

The white robes covering my body were a stark contrast to the bloodied, greying material of hers. My hair didn't look as though I had been locked away for weeks, nor was the metal relic in my hand as damaged as the wooden one in hers. Compared to her, I could've been a deity.

Wincing, she pushed up onto her elbow, facing me with her head angled towards my feet. I couldn't tell if she was bowing to me for mercy or judging my new sandals.

'And how do I look?'

She knew how she looked. My words wouldn't affect her physical state any more than it had already been.

'You look close to death.'

Scoffing, she leant over, bringing the discarded cross to her chest. Her fingers entwined over the wood. The knuckles turned white, her fingertips pressing hard into the skin. She shrunk back as some of my fellow priests walked behind me. They couldn't hurt her yet, but she gave the appearance of prey from the way her overgrown fingernails moved to dig into the scarlet fabric below her. Her knees shifted to cover her chest, to act like a shield from their methods of torture. It was too late for that.

'Why do you care how I am?' She spoke in a whisper, her eyes moving away from mine. I knew what she was expecting. That I was checking to see if she was alive. If we could break her down more. If she was willing to convert. She wanted to hate me. I wish

I could have given her that.

‘I wanted to talk to you, Aurelia.’

Her head shot up, analysing my face while forgetting to control her own expression.

‘You remember me?’

I knelt down in front of her. She shifted back, but only a little. She was scared of me, but not as terrified as she was with the others.

‘If you think I could forget your rebellious nature, then you must be insane.’

We were twelve when Aurelia first stole.

She had taken me to our usual hideout, the alleyway behind her house. It may not have been very discreet or secret, but we had sat there and talked since we were seven. Most of the time, there wasn’t anywhere we would rather be. In that moment however, I would have preferred to be anywhere but there.

Shouts echoed across the tiled roofs as she sat in front of me. Her hair was in tangles; her cheeks were scarlet from running. Despite being the image of trouble, her smile kept me seated in front of her. That and my curiosity over the bundle of sweet pastries in her lap.

‘Do you want one?’

Aurelia held one filled with honey out to me, waving it close to my face when I didn’t take it. I gave her arm a shove.

‘I am not being your accomplice to your crime.’

She rolled her eyes as she grabbed my hand and placed the pastry in it.

‘It’s not stealing if it’s family,’ she remarked.

My mouth hung open as she took a large bite, spreading crumbs into the creases of her smirk.

‘I thought you were in trouble!’

‘I am! My mother was furious when I left the house,’ she retorted. I huffed. No matter how little she cared for her own well-being, I couldn’t let her safety come down to the decisions of fate.

We sat in almost silence for a while after as we made our way through the fresh treats. By the time the sun was halfway down the sky most of the treats were gone. My stomach rumbled in joyous discomfort, joining a harmony as she spoke.

‘Have you ever thought about our religion, Lucius?’

My eyebrows furrowed as I looked towards her. She kept her gaze on the horizon as she continued without waiting for an answer.

‘We do what the priests tell us. What everyone tells us. What if there’s more? What if that’s not the religion we should follow?’

I stilled at her words. To speak like that wasn’t treason, but it was close. Treason against the gods we were taught from birth to worship.

‘Which religion would you choose?’

She smiled at me, jumping up and spreading her arms out as though she could fly.

‘Christianity!’ she spouted, speaking loud enough for the word to echo off the alleyway walls.

I had heard of it. It was mentioned behind doors, whispered between close friends, never spoken in public. It was a word that I knew Aurelia shouldn’t know, let alone say it to me. I pulled her down, clamping my hands onto her arms.

‘You can’t say that word. It’s dangerous.’

She broke out of my hold, but stood close, tilting her head to

the side.

‘Why is it dangerous?’

‘I don’t know. My mother told me not to say it. She said that the new emperor, Nero, hates the word.’

A grimace took its place on her face. She always got that look when she was defying someone, whether it was me, her mother or the Emperor of Rome. Even I could see that it would get her murdered one day.

‘Maybe he hates how simple it is. There’s only one god. And He doesn’t even have a different name! It’s just God,’ she rambled, her arms reaching outwards in excitement.

‘Aura, you can’t think like that,’ I said, pushing her arms down to her sides.

‘If we don’t think like that, then what fun is life?’

I held a steady hand out, hoping that her shaky one would clasp in mine. I stayed that way for a few seconds as she looked at me with suspicion. Then her hand uncurled from the material she sat on. Trembling fingers were placed in mine; they gripped mine with visible force despite her being so weak.

‘I know what they’re going to do to me, Lucius.’

It was my turn to move my gaze from hers. I didn’t want to think about it, but I knew she had already faced her fate. She didn’t know me in adulthood, and I wasn’t ready to show her. Her hand squeezed my own, but I refused to lift my head. How could you look into eyes that you knew would see nothing in a few hours?

‘Have you tried to escape at all?’ I spoke, my voice quiet even though we were alone.

‘Once.’

She took a deep breath, letting go of my hand. Turning around, she pulled down her dress. I heard her gasp as the fabric dragged over her back, revealing crimson lines that dented her skin.

‘Aurelia—’

‘Don’t. I’m not showing you this for your pity.’

Shaking my head, I pulled the dress further down her back. The marks were long, and they split the skin apart, leaving jagged edges of flesh.

‘Then why are you showing me this?’

‘It feels like a sign from my God. He wants you to see it, I suppose.’

I pressed a hand to her back, just above the stripes. She flinched but kept against my palm. Her skin was warm even though she was shivering.

‘Would you try to escape again?’

She turned back to me, violently shaking her head.

‘No, I won’t, I promise.’

‘That’s not why I asked.’

The frown imprinted on her face deepened as her eyebrows tilted inwards.

‘What do you mean by that?’

The tunnels of the arena were dark. It wasn’t the kind of dark that your eyes would adapt to, but the type that meant you had to feel your way through and hope there wasn’t a trap along the way. That was why I kept Aurelia’s hand in my own. She had been through here before, as a prisoner. I knew she would have been too petrified to memorize an escape route.

I almost dragged her through the tunnels, making sharp turns

that seemed to take her by surprise. Although I was taking her on what must have felt like a hopeless endeavour, she stuck close, tucked into my side.

‘Have you thought this through?’

Her voice echoed through the cramped space. We rounded the corner, a dim light allowing us to see a little. Pausing for a moment, I gripped her hand harder and brought it to my chest.

‘I try not to think things through when it comes to you.’

She smiled but her eyes stayed focused on the ground.

‘You’re being a fool,’ she scoffed.

‘You never knew me any other way.’

She snorted at that, covering her mouth with her free hand to try and muffle her laughter. A smile decorated my own face. In spite of her bloodied clothes, she appeared happy in that moment.

Then they came for us.

Thuds bounced against the wall around us, forcing us both into silence. Her mouth opened to say something, but all that came out was her breath. In comparison, I felt as though I couldn’t breathe. Each draw of air into my lungs presented an ache of pain as we listened to heavy footsteps move closer.

Neither one of us moved until we saw the glow of their torches. Her hands grasped onto my arm, beginning to drag me down the hallway. Regret consumed my thoughts: for bringing her with me, for trying to save her, for believing I could keep her safe again. My mind was screaming for us to run but my body refused to co-operate for what felt like a full minute.

She kept tugging, almost trying to wrench my arm out of its socket with her panic. Her harder tugs brought me back to reality. I blinked a few times as I grabbed her and shoved her behind me.

‘Run!’

Her bare feet began to slap against the tiles, matching with the thumps of my sandals. Our breaths stayed in sync, quickening as the footsteps behind us got louder. The corridor was growing lighter as we reached the end. A relieved gasp came from in front of me. Her running got faster. I matched the pace.

Then she stopped. Just paused in the middle of the hallway. I rounded her, watching her press her hands at the enclosed stone wall as desperation filled her voice.

‘No, no, no. Where’s the doorway?’

I swivelled, searching for the arch that I thought had been there not an hour ago. Pulling her away from obsessing over the door, I hugged her. Just held her in my arms. I wished for the noise to fade to nothing. I opened my eyes, already gathering tears in the lids, when one of them glinted. The tear rolled down my cheek, but I was no longer paying any attention to it.

‘Aura, look.’

Her face followed my outstretched arm, her expression brightening at the sight of a faint light coming from an exit we hadn’t noticed in our pursuit of freedom. She moved out of my arms, slipping her left hand in mine as she walked to the door. Our movements stayed quiet this time. Her hand gripped mine. The passageway floor became wet the closer we got to the outside. I remember thinking that it had been raining for us. I knew how much she loved rain. She showed me her excitement in freedom and nature the moment we slipped into the cold outdoors.

We were free. She was free. I could’ve taken her anywhere in that moment as long as it was a place we could both be safe. Instead, her God decided her destination first.

There was the sound of heavy footsteps getting closer. Something slicing through flesh. A soft thump next to me.

I felt her hand tug on mine as she fell. Her body pulled my arm, straining it as her legs folded. My head turned as her knees hit the floor.

‘Aura?’

There was a dagger sticking out of her back, fresh blood adding to the stains covering her dress.

‘No!’

I dropped down next to her fallen body. Her breathing was quiet but there. My mind was crying out, but there was nothing I could do. A dagger to the back wasn’t something you could survive. I pulled her closer, apologising as she whimpered.

Large hands seized me, trying to wrench me away from her. I fought the guard. Aurelia’s blood was on his hands already; I wasn’t ready to let him have mine.

‘I am a priest of Jupiter. Unhand me.’

I shrugged him off me as he saw the symbol of my rank attached to my robes. I had broken the law and the oath I took as a priest. Stern words wouldn’t hold him back forever. Wrapping my arms back round her, I glared at him and spoke.

‘She may believe in the Christian faith, but no human being deserves to die without praying first.’

I pushed at his knee and he stepped back.

‘I *will* pray for her.’

The man nodded, moving further away. His eyes were downcast, despite how his mind must’ve wanted to take her now. Religion may have been what led us here, but my rank in our religion still carried weight. Even if they couldn’t understand Christianity, no one dared to interrupt a prayer this close to death.

‘Aura, what do I do?’ I whispered.

Cobbles stained with her blood as I sat there with her in my

lap. She gave me a solemn smile, holding out for my hand. Our hands could have been fused together from how firm we held one another. I felt her grip loosen, so I clasped tighter for her.

‘You don’t do anything. If we were to escape, then He would have made it happen.’

She held me close, and in that moment, I felt like the cross she had left behind in the arena. Her nails were digging into my skin, but I couldn’t have cared any less. Mine were doing the same, afraid I would watch her be dragged away without me.

‘Lucius, please don’t let go.’

Her voice was shivering. My own would’ve been the same had I tried to speak, so I stayed silent. There were no promises I could make her that I wouldn’t betray.

So I prayed. I appealed to Jupiter, to Venus, even Mercury, in the hope that they would save her. I would have given my soul for her to stay in that realm if she would’ve stood a chance.

Aurelia had been my world for so many years. She had felt like my goddess even though she was mortal. She could have changed the world, but nobody wanted to listen. She was committing herself to her true God and nothing I said would change that. But oh Jupiter, I wish it had.

There were so many loud voices, but the only one that mattered had gone silent. I was being told to let her go, to let myself be punished for my actions. I ignored them. Placing her on the ground fully, I lay next to her and stared up at the afternoon sky. Soft tones of blue were mixing with pink as the sun watched us from its place low on the horizon. I blocked out every noise, pulling her hand to my chest once more. It was still warm to the touch, but her blood was slow to return to the areas I pressed. I wondered if mine would be that slow soon.

The steps around me were deafening, but I kept them blocked out, watching her face for any sign that she was faking. That it was a joke like when we were children. Her eyes would open, and she would smile while tears ran over my nose. But we weren't children anymore. We couldn't justify our actions with naivety. I would pay for the consequences of my actions, as she had already done for hers.

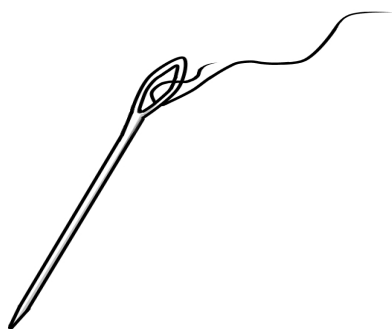
Aurelia's eyes stayed closed. So I closed mine too. I hoped that Cupid would convene with Pluto, and when I opened them, I would be staring at the same sky as her.

Anchoring Stitches

Charli Marriott

Charli Marriott is a British writer from Lincolnshire. She is a recent Creative Writing graduate of the University of Lincoln. Charli has been published in journals and aspires to become a narrative designer for AAA games. When not writing, she can often be found enjoying music and playing video games.

Content warnings: Body horror, gore, sexual themes.



The bell chimed as Rina strode into the Needle makers. Sunlit specks of dust and dead skin pirouetted across the grimy windows and weaved in between the cascading wooden shelves, that surrounded the shop floor. They housed gangs of rectangular boxes, each unique and spectacular in their design. Some sported velvet casing, most bound in leather, and all sat upon a cream silk cushion inside a glass cabinet. The lids sat beside them, revealing their filling. Needles, sharp and thin, and hooked and precise. They glowed a white glint that bloomed against the planks of the shelf. The shop smelled almost as old as it looked. With every progressing footstep, a plume of musk and mildew diffused throughout the dusky emporium. At the front of the room stood a withered man who leant on a crooked desk.

‘Welcome, my dear. How can I help?’

The man’s eyes oozed secrets without his mouth having to utter a word, as they shone from where they were embedded in his greyed skin. Half buttoned upon his breast; he wore a tattered plaid shirt. The colour was undiscernible in the shadow of the dark room. An almost red that Rina could only imagine had faded from a long, wandering life.

‘I’m looking for a needle, please.’

‘Now, that’s an accent I don’t hear very often.’

He beamed. His voice was like silk, enchanting and honest. A smile crept across Rina’s cheeks.

‘England.’

They answered at the same time. The old shopkeeper tapped his index finger on his temple and winked.

‘Awfully far to travel for a needle, isn’t it? Still no good craftsmen in England?’

He chuckled to himself, folding his arms.

'I have a client in Harajuku this month. She needs a dress for a wedding.'

'Ah, the fashion capital of the world. Plenty of good seamstresses there, you must be a talent.'

'So, I've heard.'

The pair shared a laugh.

'Who am I to turn you away? Have a browse. Was there anything specific you were looking for?'

'Something sharp. Needs to go through leather.'

'Well, what else?'

He gestured his hand in a circle before taking the glass monocle that dangled from his apron and attaching it to his right eye. Before Rina could muster a reply, he had already disappeared behind the desk. Moments later, his inquisitive face bloomed in the glass of the cabinet below. His absence revealed a curious collection, mounted on the wall behind the counter. Needles, ornate and strange, twisted, and thin. A cacophony of oval eyes and masterful control. Framed, in the centre of his bundle, engraved with golden filigree, the perfect needle. It was sharp and clean and made all the others look like splinters. Rina's eyebrow crept up her forehead, as she fixated on the instrument.

The Shopkeeper stood from his squat. His thinning grey hair had frizzed into static spindles, and his cheeks hewed a gentle plum. He held boxes, but none intrigued her as much as the needle, framed on the wall.

'Oh. That one? It is not for sale.'

She shook her head and broke free from her trance.

'Why? It is perfect. Is it one of yours?'

The Shopkeeper chortled,

'My best work.'

‘Name a price.’

‘You wouldn’t want it.’

The shopkeeper smirked. Rina rooted through the brown leather bag and produced a purse from its contents. It jangled as she slammed it onto the mantle. The man licked his front teeth.

‘Any price.’

His grin widened, revealing jagged tea-stained molars.

‘That needle, it is peculiar. Beautiful, but it belongs to someone else.’

Rina stirred and narrowed her eyes.

‘Peculiar? Amuse me.’

She wasn’t interested in pleasantries. The Needle makers face dropped. He pressed his hand against the table, it creaked as he leant. With the other, he reached under the counter and pulled out a small velvet box.

‘This piece is a marvel for leatherwork.’

The needle inside was indeed sharp and clean, but it did not lustre like the one on the wall. She shook her head. The Shopkeeper sighed and dagged behind him at the needle that called Rina’s name. He hobbled from out of his enclosure, revealing a crooked pair of legs wrapped in grey slacks, and limped over to the blinds that clattered against the shop windows.

SLAM.

As they fell shut, the shop fell into a thick darkness; it was all but pitch besides the dim lamplight that trickled from the walls. He sauntered back to his desk, with heavy, well-worn footsteps and withdrew the frame from the wall. It clattered as it collided with the countertop.

‘This needle belonged to Shira Yokawa.’

Rina crept back.

‘Shira Yokawa?’

‘Quite the star in your field.’

She placed a hand on her chest.

‘Last I heard she went missing? How can it-’

The shopkeeper sighed and shut his eyes.

‘Quite the opposite of missing, actually. They found her in a box, dressed up in her finest silks. Heh, they were probably sewn by this needle.’

A groan brewed in her stomach.

‘I understand, perhaps another -

‘Oh no my dear. You don’t understand. Not yet.’

He pulled a cigar from his breast pocket and set it alight. The sparks lit up his face as he took a long, purposeful drag. When he exhaled, the bellow of tar erupted over Rina’s eyeline. She spluttered and cleared the air with a wafting hand.

‘You see, her husband was a sick man. He played with her.’

Rina drew closer, intrigued by his words.

‘Kept her like a pet, groomed her and dressed her and kept her down in whatever hole he had in that house.’

‘She must’ve gone mad.’

He took another drag and swallowed.

‘He killed her because he wanted her all to himself, and with a woman of her stature – ‘

‘He killed her?’

‘Mhm.’

The grin crept across the Shopkeeper’s face once again. A wave of sickness burrowed deep inside of Rina., her head throbbed and her gums ached.

‘That needle followed him around after she died, you see. He tried to get rid of it. Out the window, in the bin. He’d even tried

burning it at one point, but it kept coming back. From what I heard, it sent him loopy.’

‘That needle?’

‘This needle.’

He tapped his finger on the desk next to the frame.

‘And here’s the good part.’

His voice descended into a whisper.

‘Mr Yokawa was convinced it was a yurei’s work.’

Rime filled the shop, covering each crevice in a deathly cold.

‘A yurei?’

‘Jealous things.’

The shopkeeper cleared his throat.

‘Vengeful spirits, unable to find peace in the afterlife.’

‘Jealous things.’

‘He thought his wife was teasing him from the afterlife? He must’ve been insane.’

Rina spilled a nervous laugh. The old man did not reciprocate, his furrow stayed heavy and his stance remained firm, as he pressed his elbows further into the table. His encroaching shadow painted an ashy vignette in the tunnel of her irises.

‘Teasing is not the word I would use. A few light jabs, maybe. But safe to say he got what he deserved.’

His words blurred, as she eyed the needle. Up close, it was a stranger. Blunt edged and rusty, with flecks of peeling auburn. She thought back to its lustre, strung up on the wall, its brilliant detail, and its cold point.

‘What happened to her husband?’

She raised her head, The Shopkeeper’s gaze was now sharper than the needle, menacing and dark. His canines protruded from his pasty lips, and spots of drool lathered across his freckled chin.

‘The police only realised he was dead because of the smell.’

The static of the silence rang in her ears. Her hands trembled. Her breath was thin.

‘Suicide?’

His face collapsed into a sinister grin.

‘Something got him. Might’ve been her. Could you blame her?’

His eyes were pendulums of fear. Big, black marbles, darting and raving. She wanted to look away, but his stare was magnetic. Frantic. Her lips trembled, and then she remembered.

‘I knew it,’

The Shopkeeper raised his brow and cupped his hands together. The blood pulsed in her head. The old man’s eyes shrunk, and his smile dropped.

‘This is quite the sales pitch. I should’ve known. I don’t do business with conmen. Using a person’s death to peddle your wares? Despicable.’

She scoffed and grasped the corner of her coat as she turned away from the desk. Her heels clogged against the floorboards as she strutted away. As she clacked, the sight of the door ahead of her grew close. The knock of a latch clicked behind her, followed by a sinister creak.

‘You Brits are awful sceptic,’ his voice fried as he spoke.

She froze. Her eyes panned to her peripheral. She couldn’t move. She wanted to, but the force of her terror halted her. The shopkeeper laughed, slow and gruff. She felt her head turning over her shoulder, like her will wasn’t her own. It twisted until her body followed, and she was face to face with the man again. This time he wasn’t alone.

‘See for yourself.’

And there he was. The fear coated Rina like an oil slick. Her

brain shook her eyeballs. Dizzy, but she couldn't look away. Its eyes were gouged and hollow and his frayed cheeks sunk underneath the dips in his skull. Mangled hands locked together. Her eyes then traced over to his mouth. Thin and chapped lips, sealed with a thick yellow thread. She sauntered closer, entranced by the old dead thing.

'Mesmerising, isn't it? Just a regular night. Lock the door, close the binds and oh! right on that very porch. Her needle was still inside.'

Rina's voice had been stolen from her. She looked closer. The stitches were masterful, perfect, and tight.

'Like I said, it's got a mind of its own.'

He tapped his finger next to the needle on the desk.

'She whispers to me.'

Rina stayed fixated on the corpse.

'She doesn't like you very much. You're stealing her jobs, she says.'

'I don't-'

Her throat scratched, raw. His words frothed in Rina's ears.

'Oh dear, you're looking terribly pale.'

The dizziness ate her from the inside, crawling up into her head. His smirk burned inside her eyes. The corpse watched on, as the shop faded to black.

'What day is it?'

It was the first thing Rina asked as she woke up. The room around her was clinical and white. Nurses waned through the room, twisting dials and patting sheets.

'Tuesday. You must've fainted. What do you remember last?'

Rina scrunched up her face and flicked through her memory. The plane and the lukewarm coffee at the airport, the waft of sweet mochi as she stepped from the taxi. The Needle maker.

‘Erm – Harajuku, I think. I have to get to my client.’

‘They found you out cold, on the street. Travelling will do it to you, happens to us all. We’re just going to run some final checks and you’re free to go.’

The pulses and whirs from the monitors in the hospital faded into the horns of Suzukis and the nattering of midday swarms, as Rina reached her client’s home. Three raps on the broad green door, and before the fourth it had already swung open. Swallowed by the threshold, she found herself greeted by a small lady in a maid’s uniform. She was old, with a kind glistening smile, and grey peppered hair gathered in a low ponytail.

‘Thank goodness you’re here. We tried calling, the mistress was worried sick.’

Rina stuffed her hand in the pocket of her jeans and pulled out her phone. The reflection that stared back at her was rough. Bruised and blotchy, with a matted fringe and bags underneath her eyes that were sturdier than any she could ever imagine sewing herself.

‘I’m sure it’s no worries. Just a long day.’

Memories of yesterday danced in her memory like ghosts in a maze, teasing around corners like mischievous phantoms.

The lady stood to the side, and beckoned Rina inside. It was a grand place, opulent and preserved, so much so that the maid’s knuckles had begun to shine almost as much as the mahogany furnishings. When they finally reached the sitting room, the maid spoke again.

‘You must come and sit; how do you take your tea?’

‘Sugar, please. Lots of it.’

‘Sugar?’ She said, before mumbling under her breath in Japanese.

‘Please.’ Rina repeated, hidden behind a clumsy smile.

‘Make yourself at home. The mistress will be with you as soon as possible.’

She scrunched her apron in her hands and whisked away, trotting to the other side of the room. Rina looked away, examining abstract paintings and strange antique artifacts that hung about every corner. She drank the colour as she scanned the room. Shibuya had not been what she had expected from the travel guides in England, in fact this felt like the first time she had seen vivid colour in hours. Gorgeous watercolour fruit sat neatly in bowls to her left, cubist faces to her right. The maids voice broke her reverie.

‘Oh! Before I forget, I believe that parcel belongs to you.’

She faced Rina again, and gestured her hand towards the ornate mahogany table, in the centre of the room.

Rina’s eyes followed the lady’s finger, where a small white box sat.

‘Strange man dropped it off; said you left it behind? I thought best not to pry.’

The feeling came before the thoughts. Dark and cold, like she had swallowed an anchor. Her head pranged, something blunt knocked at her skull.

Rina picked up the box, unpicked the twine, and hesitated before she opened the lid. She looked around the room again. Left. Right. Pinks had become greys, the green smudged and blurred. Her hands shook as she pried the contents from its package. Blood from her head pooled to her feet.

Plush against a silk cushion, agonising and rusted, the needles eye glared into hers.

Nowhere Plans

Daniel Carpenter

Daniel Carpenter is an English writer from Nottingham, studying in Lincoln. Specialising in scriptwriting, he enjoys giving an audience striking images to make them feel something new. Daniel has been published in the First Story creative anthology. Aside from writing, he spends his time wondering where it all went wrong.

Content warnings: Mild violence.



Prologue (spoken): Be warned, fair audience. These men are not who you believe them to be. They're not hopeful. They're not worthy. They're certainly not your friends. Beware of their ridiculous nature and beware of their bite. They're not dogs but they might still bark at you. Also, please excuse the smell. They haven't been able to wash in a day. Shall we introduce our hosts? First is Graham. He wouldn't like you. Not one bit. He's old and decrepit but loves a gin. Don't go near him if he's being existential. And we come to Connor. Some may say he's cool and down to Earth. Others may say he's under it. Little bunker joke for you there. Any who, please try to be entertained as little as you can be. These men don't deserve the commendation. Enjoy the show!

Scene 1: Try

Darkness. Then LIGHTS. The stage is illuminated. A well-furnished nuclear bunker. A fireplace, not alight. A painting above it. A ladder rising to the top on stage right. A young man sits back against an old man, both in wicker chairs. GRAHAM, the older dressed like a pheasant hunter, reads a newspaper. Connor, the younger dressed in a tracksuit, spins a rugby ball on his finger.

GRAHAM: Say Connor, *do you like rhubarb?*

CONNOR: Do you like rhubarb?

GRAHAM: I am asking you a question.

Connor scratches his chin.

CONNOR: I don't know, I've never met anyone called Barbara.

Graham shoots Connor a stern look.

GRAHAM: I mean the confectionary.

CONNOR: I haven't been allowed sweets since I was 16.

GRAHAM: Well, how old are you now, boy?

CONNOR: 16.

Graham nods in acknowledgement. He flicks through his newspaper, dated Saturday 30 September 1967.

GRAHAM: What day is it today, fellow chum?

CONNOR: I think Tuesday.

GRAHAM: Ah, good. The milkman should be round soon.

The doorbell rings on cue.

GRAHAM: Get it, lad.

Connor buffs and rises out of his chair and heads to stage right. There's a ladder leading to the ceiling. A light shines down as SFX of a hatch opening.

MILKMAN (V.O.) *silly Yorkshire accent*: Ya alright?

CONNOR: Yeah man, you?

MILKMAN (V.O.): I'm ace. Got your pre-cheese here.

CONNOR: Brap wicked.

Connor flicks his fingers like he's trying to start a fire. He catches a milk bottle that is tossed from off-stage right.

CONNOR (continued): Cheers.

MILKMAN (V.O.): Cheers.

Connor and the Milkman share a swig of the milk. SFX of slurping.

CONNOR: See ya.

The hatch slams shut. The fire is now alight and Connor places the carrier of milk next to it. He sits back in his chair, spinning the rugby ball again.

CONNOR: Do you mind if I have a game?

Graham waves his hand in a general direction,

GRAHAM: Have at it.

Connor stands up again and darts around the room, throwing and catching the rugby ball in a spiral. He attempts a pass but launches the rugby ball into the wall above the fireplace. The painting on the wall crashes to the floor.

GRAHAM: You're a moron.

Connor leaves the rugby ball to burn in the fire. He returns to his seat and does nothing else.

GRAHAM: I used to play rugby back in the day, lad.

CONNOR: What position did you play?

GRAHAM: Forwards.

Graham chuckles to himself, still reading the newspaper.

CONNOR: Great.

Connor takes a deep breath. He turns in his chair like a child eagerly waiting to ask something.

CONNOR: I was thinking of starting a rugby club.

GRAHAM: Down here?

CONNOR: Yeah.

GRAHAM: Good luck finding people to join.

CONNOR: Thank you.

Connor whips out a phone from the 70s. He dials numerous numbers until it starts to ring.

CONNOR: Jerry, shush, shush, I know.

Connor covers the speaker on the phone.

CONNOR (whispering to Graham): He's gonna drag this on a bit.

Connor returns to the phone in glee.

CONNOR: We're getting the band back together.

Connor fists the air as LIGHTS go out.

Scene 2: Two

LIGHTS. The pair are turned 90 degrees clockwise in their chairs. Graham faces the audience and Connor is turned away. There is a full-sized mirror in the back left corner of the stage. Connor starts to sing with no melody. His voice is raspy.

CONNOR: *Do you know the Muffin Man? He has a green Christmas Ham. He'll come for your knees, boy. Do you know who I am?*
Graham slams his newspaper down.

GRAHAM: What on God's green earth are you doing?

CONNOR: Singing.

GRAHAM: What kind of song is that, you imbecile?

CONNOR: It's a song we used to sing in Primary School. Do you like it?

Connor spins in his chair and gets in front of Graham's face.

GRAHAM: Not so much.

Graham retrieves the newspaper and folds it into a swan.

CONNOR: Ah yeah, that's sick.

GRAHAM: Thanks.

CONNOR: I'm off to the mirror, see ya in a bit.

GRAHAM: See ya.

Connor makes his way to the mirror. Connor reaches the mirror and immediately gasps. Graham stays staring at his newspaper, unfeeling.

GRAHAM: What's the matter?

CONNOR (mumbling): I've turned into you.

GRAHAM: Speak louder boy.

CONNOR: I've bloody turned into you, you old tosser!

GRAHAM: Let me see.

Graham rises out of his chair and joins Connor.

GRAHAM: Hm, how strange.

CONNOR: I know, right?

GRAHAM: No, I don't see that. *I've* turned into *you*.

CONNOR: Oh god.

Connor starts pulling his hair out.

CONNOR (continued): Are we going mad?

GRAHAM: I'm sure there is a perfectly reasonable explanation for this.

CONNOR: WHAT KIND OF EXPLANATION?

Connor drops to the floor, flat on his back exhausted. Graham ponders; he looks about in search of an answer. Graham raises his finger.

GRAHAM: I've got it!

CONNOR: Go on.

GRAHAM: Clearly...

He pauses for a moment. He's trying to be careful.

CONNOR: Go on!

GRAHAM: Clearly... it's a funny mirror.

CONNOR: What the bleeding hell is a *funny mirror*?

GRAHAM: Those ones you get in a funhouse. I assumed the mirrors would be funny too.

CONNOR: There's nothing funny about it. I would hate to be you!

GRAHAM: Why, my boy? I'm dashing and riveting.

Graham winks to the audience.

CONNOR: No, you're brash and revolting. Did you see what I did there? *Connor gives it to the audience too, expecting applause. Graham turns to Connor like he's just been shot.*

GRAHAM: I feel like I've just been shot.

CONNOR: I wish.

The pair stop what they're doing and lock eyes.

GRAHAM: You need to sort your cheek out, son.

CONNOR: My cheek is fine, I only bruised it yesterday morning.

GRAHAM: And stop with the back chat.

CONNOR: And my back only *slightly* has a hunch.

GRAHAM: I have a hunch that you hate me.

Graham turns to the audience and spurs them on.

CONNOR: They won't care what you think. And I don't either.

GRAHAM: You're a liar.

CONNOR: I wish I was.

CONNOR (to the audience): Shame on you.

GRAHAM: Let's get back to our focus. I'm handsome.

CONNOR: You're old...

GRAHAM: And handsome.

CONNOR: I'm done. See ya later.

Connor makes his way to their chairs and steals Graham's newspaper. He lays it over his face and drifts off to sleep. Graham notices this and doesn't know what to do with himself.

GRAHAM (whispering): Psst. Connor. Get up.

Futile.

GRAHAM: Oi, I want my weekly back.

No use. Connor wakes up again. The newspaper falls off his face and all that can be seen is Connor's unbothered mug.

CONNOR: Why must you not let me sleep?

GRAHAM: I missed you.

CONNOR: Is that so?

GRAHAM: Scouts' honour.

Graham holds three fingers over his heart.

CONNOR: If you say so. Can I ask a question of you, dear friend?

GRAHAM: Sure.

CONNOR: How often do you dream of going outside?

GRAHAM: All the time. And you?

CONNOR: Never. I'm not built for it.

Connor slumps in his chair. Graham starts to console him, a hand on his shoulder.

GRAHAM: You're just going through a sticky patch. I promise you, nothing will be bad anymore.

Connor is teary-eyed. He sniffles.

GRAHAM (continued): You're the bravest person I know. And I only know you and myself, barely.

CONNOR: You really mean that?

GRAHAM: Of course.

They share an embrace. They're in sync. Each action is mirrored in each other. Graham and Connor wipe the air together. They make waxing-on motions. They're gleeful and astonished.

CONNOR & GRAHAM (in unison): Pwoah, I can't wait to be like you.

LIGHTS go out.

Scene 3: Bee

LIGHTS. Connor and Graham are face-to-face. They're wearing each other's outfits and have swapped props. Connor has the newspaper and Graham has the rugby ball. There's a slight buzzing sound. The pair notice.

GRAHAM: What's that funny noise?

CONNOR: The clock.

GRAHAM: No, it's like a humming. Have you left the gas on?

CONNOR: Do not be a fool. I would never.

GRAHAM: Then what is it?

The buzzing gets louder and louder (SFX). A bee parades around the room. It lands on Connor's head.

CONNOR: Great Scott! Bee!

Connor shoots out of his chair, bunny hops over Graham and frolics around the room.

GRAHAM: What're you talking about? How could a bee get in?

CONNOR (panting): When I retrieved the milk... possibly.

Connor makes it to a stop in front of Graham. He's breathless. The pair stare at each other for a second.

CONNOR: GET IT OFF ME.

Graham shuffles back and forth, nicks the newspaper from Connor's chair and slams it on Connor's skull. A thud and then Connor outbursts.

CONNOR: You buffoon!

Graham holds his arms out.

GRAHAM: What?

CONNOR: Maybe do not strike me on my head next time.

Graham salutes like a cadet. Connor shakes his head in exasperation.

CONNOR: Why do you always ruin things?

GRAHAM: You're too much of a wimp to do anything. That's your problem.

They buff and puff and return to their seats. Connor dozes off whilst Gra-

ham pulls out a Game Boy. He turns the volume to maximum.

GRAHAM: Ooh, a Charmander!

Connor can't sleep. He wakes up and looks at Graham.

CONNOR: Is that a Game Boy?

GRAHAM: Yes, pal.

CONNOR: How far have you gotten up to?

Connor joins Graham as he looks over his shoulder at the Game Boy. Graham pauses for a second. He presses some buttons on the handheld console.

GRAHAM: Just reached the second gym.

CONNOR: Is that the one with the Rock types?

GRAHAM: Nah, Water.

CONNOR: My mistake, I have not played in quite a few years.

GRAHAM: No worries.

Connor gets back to his seat and twiddles his thumbs.

CONNOR: I am bored.

GRAHAM: Hi bored, I'm G-dawg.

CONNOR: I am being serious. Do you want to do something exciting?

GRAHAM: I quite fancy killing someone!

Connor stamps.

CONNOR: Are you out of your mind?

GRAHAM: What's the matter C-urchin?

CONNOR: You cannot go around killing people! It is against the law.

GRAHAM (under his breath): You'd know all about that, wouldn't you?

CONNOR: Excuse me?

GRAHAM: Did you burp or summat?

Connor sniffs his breath and shrugs, it's not intolerable.

GRAHAM: And another thing, you stink! Seriously, you need a

wash.

CONNOR: There is nothing down here to wash myself with.

GRAHAM: You could always use the fire. Burn your clothes every time they stink.

Graham giggles.

CONNOR: What a fantastic, practical idea. Why did I not think of that before?

Graham shrugs. Connor pulls out a piece of chalk from his tweed jacket pocket. He draws a squiggly line on the floor.

CONNOR (continued): I am splitting the room.

GRAHAM: But it's not equal.

CONNOR: I never said it was. I deserve more.

GRAHAM: Why do you?

CONNOR: Because I have to withstand all of your nonsense.

GRAHAM: And I have to withstand your abrasiveness.

CONNOR: I have never been abrasive in my entire existence, I will have you know.

GRAHAM (to the audience and Connor): Do you not remember *Act 1*?

CONNOR: I would not like to talk about it.

Air raid sirens deafen the stage.

GRAHAM: What is going on?

CONNOR: I don't know but I'm scared.

Connor falls to the ground in a surrender. Graham follows suit but attempts to comfort him, hugging Connor.

CONNOR: I don't want it to be our time yet. There's no one I would want to spend my last days with more than you.

GRAHAM: Hear hear, old chum. But you're being silly. We're alright.

*The pair lay, cuddling in the middle of the room. Sirens blare as they cry.
Bombs drop. That's all. LIGHTS go out for the final time.*

END

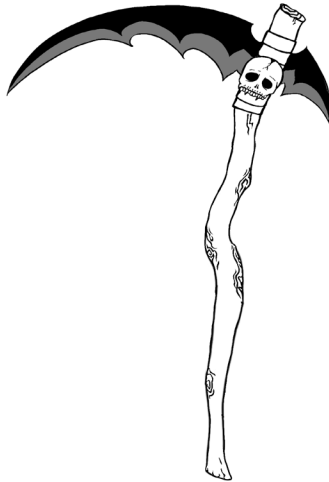
Witchfinder

Mollie Lemmon

Mollie Lemmon is an English writer currently pursuing a bachelor's degree in Creative Writing at the University of Lincoln. She takes influence mostly from music and mythology.

When not writing, she can be found baking treats, often requested by her brother.

Content warnings: Blood, brief implication of child death.



Did you hear what happened to the second son of the Harmony family? Quite the story. Witches got to him when he was little more than a week old. Ever since then, they've been rather paranoid.

Bet you heard what happened to the first son of the Harmony family? To be married in the autumn. So, when they found a, to quote them, "suspicious herb" in the kitchen (after a visit from an electrician) they didn't hesitate to call me – Mr Theodore Scythe. Professionally I'm a witchfinder, though I've been called many things in private.

My job was to scout the grounds for any more signs of witches. In return, I'd be bathed in gilded hardwood, crystal and food good enough to make you want to kill a man. All courtesy of the richest family in the city. I don't think that's too shabby, if you ask me.

'Congratulations, and a long life to the both of you.' That concluded a long and, if I were being honest, *painful* speech from Mr George Harmony to his son, Arthur, and future daughter-in-law, Nathalie.

Mr Harmony's wife, Caroline, nudged the family's daughter, Rose, with a smile. 'Don't worry dear, you'll be next.'

Rose giggled and took a sip of wine.

'Say,' Rose leaned over her food to me. 'What's the worst thing you've ever seen a witch do?'

Mr Harmony looked at his daughter and scoffed. 'Come now, Rose, I'm sure Mr Scythe does not want to regale us with such unpleasant stories.'

'Nor should a young lady be hearing them.' Mrs Harmony added.

'Arthur was younger—'

'Have you ever been an actor, Mr Scythe?' Mrs Harmony shift-

ed the conversation.

‘No, ma’am.’

Caroline lifted her wine glass and spun it, watching as the light refracted through the crystal. ‘You aren’t lying to me, are you, mister? You carry yourself like one who was made on the stage.’

‘Take the compliment and run,’ Mr Harmony was focused on cutting his steak with a cruel precision. ‘My wife has always been fond of actors.’

‘Isn’t there a new show with that Troy Cailio you like—’

Nathalie was cut off when Madeline, the Harmony family’s maid, dropped an empty water jug on her way back to the kitchen.

Arthur scrambled to his feet, knocking over his chair in his desperation. He and Madeline knelt at the same time and brushed their hands together when they both reached for the jug. Madeline’s eyes went wide, her pale face flushed.

The two stood when the family patriarch coughed into his fist. He shared a silent argument with his wife while Arthur held the door open for Madeline and returned to his seat.

Nathalie had watched the entire exchange with a small smile. I tried to gauge Rose’s reaction, but she became infatuated with her food.

‘No need to worry, Nathalie, Madeline won’t be working for this family when the wedding nears.’

That caught Rose’s attention, whipping her head to look at her father. She took a deep breath and began to fiddle with her necklace.

‘Oh, that’s not necessary, Father,’ Arthur lifted his chin with a smile. ‘I think we both agree Madeline is quite capable.’

‘Speaking of weddings,’ Caroline tried to change the subject. ‘Won’t we have to update that after?’

“That” referred to a painting of the family, hung up in a carved frame. I had to hand it to them, they’d thought of everything. The smiles were there, so you knew they tolerated each other’s company, but they weren’t so big that you’d think they did anything more than that. Every member of the family was there. Every single one of them. Despite Arthur and Rose being depicted as grown adults, the second son was depicted exactly as he was. A bundle of blankets in the arms of his mother. Even if they knew what the boy looked like now, which they did, that was the last time he was considered acceptable by society.

‘Mr Scythe?’

‘Hm?’

Rose had this confused look on her face when I’d turned back from the picture.

Is everything alright? You didn’t answer the first time.”

I smiled, laughed and shook my head before standing up.

‘You’ll have to forgive me. I’m rather tired.’

Mrs Harmony looked me up and down. She seemed confident that I couldn’t read what was going through her mind. I could.

‘Rest well, Mr Scythe.’

I cleared my throat, bringing Arthur’s attention from Madeline to myself. ‘Goodnight to you all. Congratulations again.’

The next morning started with a scream.

Arthur’s bedroom was at the east end of the estate, with a beautiful view of the estate’s gardens. There was a mahogany four poster bed, with linens as white as the wings of a dove. It would’ve been quite pretty, if you ignored Arthur’s body. It stared up at the canopy with its hand hanging off the bed.

Nathalie was curled in the corner on the floor, trembling all over. Her hand was covering her mouth. Madeline stood beside

her, looking at the floor, toying with the headscarf in her hair.

There was a gasp and a scream behind me, where Mr and Mrs Harmony now stood. Mr Harmony was aiming to break the doorway with the way he was gripping the edge of the doorframe. His wife had forced their daughter into her chest. Part of me wanted to mention something. Although it didn't happen, I wouldn't have minded if it did. After all, a mother accidentally pushing her daughter over the first-floor railing while trying to keep her from seeing her dead brother's body? Now, *that* would've been quite the scandal.

'Mr Scythe?' Mr Harmony asked.

'Asphyxiation.'

Nathalie whimpered and cast a glance towards the body before tearing up and looking away, pressing a hand to her mouth. Speaking of hands...

'Nathalie, is your hand alright?' I asked.

She swallowed and cast a look down at her hand, where white cloth was wound around her palm.

'Yes.'

'It looks worse than it did last night.'

'I can be rather clumsy.'

I held the body's hand up to the light. Dark blood marred the fingernails. It could've been anything between a light scrape to something close to a dismemberment. The fact it was there was good enough for me though.

'You can be rather clumsy,' I repeated. 'Yet I see nothing in this room that could've caused your injury.'

'Because I wasn't in this room.'

Mr Harmony gathered his courage and marched into the room.

‘Alone? Where did you go?’

Nathalie looked at the body’s hand and then at my face. She looked between Mr Harmony and me before standing up.

‘Nathalie?’ Mr Harmony took a step forward and Nathalie backed herself against the door. She opened her mouth, but no sound came out.

‘She said she was going to the gardens.’

Madeline’s voice was as sudden as a rooster cawing at the rising sun. She looked up at me with eyes like the crystal wine glasses the Harmony family drink out of so often.

‘Master Arthur wanted some tea before bed. I had just delivered it when Miss Nathalie said she wanted some fresh air.’

‘Thank you, Madeline.’ Nathalie stepped away from the door and looked towards the windows showing the gardens.

‘It was all the excitement, I suppose. I needed some fresh air, and I always thought the gardens looked so pretty.’

‘So, you went alone?’

Rose pushed her mother aside and tutted. ‘Father. This estate was going to belong to her, anyway.’

‘Not if she had anything to do with it!’ Mr Harmony jabbed a finger in Madeline’s direction. Mrs Harmony clenched Rose’s wrist so hard that her face contorted.

Rose grabbed onto the edge of the doorframe, ‘Father—’

‘She has ideas about him!’

Rose scoffed. ‘Arthur is your son, Father. Your *son*. Don’t you think he would’ve confided in you in all those hours you had him working?’

‘You—’

‘Alright!’ I slammed my hand on the bedside table. ‘Nathalie, you went to the gardens alone?’

‘Yes, I went alone. I tripped over one of the cobblestones and cut my hand. I returned here after I bandaged myself.’

‘Was Arthur in the room?’

Nathalie squeezed her eyes shut and let her head fall into her hands. ‘The light was off. I didn’t know, I assumed. I thought he was... I didn’t want to wake him.’

Nathalie bent over and gasped. She muttered something about not knowing before running out of the room and down the hallway.

Mrs Harmony cleared her throat, ‘Madeline, I trust breakfast will be ready in due time?’

‘Yes, Ma’am.’

Mrs Harmony nodded and Madeline left.

‘Something wrong, Mr Scythe?’ I was inspecting the bruises around the body’s neck when Rose spoke up. Her mother was tugging at her wrist.

‘Mr Harmony, I regret to inform you that my duties are no longer completed.’

‘Excuse you? You tear my estate apart and now tell me you’re not done?’

‘I have examined the estate. Now I must examine the people within it.’

Mr Harmony walked close to me and stuck a finger in my face.

‘George!’ Mrs Harmony warned.

‘I’ll have you know, I am very good friends with—’

‘Marks from a witch’s poison can mimic asphyxiation. Witches have already taken both of your sons, Mr Harmony. Don’t let it happen to your daughter too.’

He looked at me twice before he finally left with his wife and Rose. Meanwhile, I took a quick trip to the kitchen.

‘Isn’t there a cook?’

Madeline was busy fussing over sizzling pans. ‘No.’

I walked to the central island and looked into a fruit bowl, picking up an apple and throwing and catching it, ‘Rather a lot of work for you, isn’t it?’

‘I don’t mind.’

‘You don’t mind.’

I caught the apple one final time. ‘Need I remind you that a witch’s poison leaves marks very similar to that of someone who’s been strangled.’

Madeline moved the pans around on the stove and poked a couple sausages with a cooking fork.

‘Welcome in, Miss.’ She called over her shoulder.

Rose crept into the kitchen and cast a glance at us both.

‘Rather good hearing there, Madeline.’

‘You’ve got to!’ Rose answered a little too quickly. ‘Mother doesn’t like raising her voice, so it was a bit of a job requirement, you see.’

Rose giggled before inspecting a rack of pans above our heads. I was more interested in a different type of rack though. At the back of the room, above a window were a collection of herbs bound together in little bundles.

‘You could do with some more of those, don’t you think?’

Madeline cast a quick glance at the herbs before nodding, ‘Stephen usually grows them, but we’ve had a bad harvest.’

‘A bad harvest.’

Rose nodded and readjusted her necklace, running the pendant through her fingers. ‘Happens all the time.’

I nodded and went to speak.

‘You should ask him!’ Rose interrupted. ‘He won’t mind, I

know it!

I took a deep breath.

‘Rose did you hear about what happened to the Ivorys?’

Rose dropped her necklace and stood up straighter.

‘Mrs Ivory had a bastard child. A son by some blacksmith or another. It all came out after the boy’s father died. The father had to starve himself just to ensure his son ate. Mrs Ivory never catered for them’

‘Right, you’re very knowledgeable. Say—’

Madeline dropped a small plate with a crash. She looked between Rose and me. Rose didn’t spare her a second glance.

‘Say what?’

‘Remember that actor your mother gushed about at your brother’s engagement dinner?’

Rose grabbed her necklace again.

‘What about him?’

I leaned in close with a smile.

‘Did you ever think your brother looked a bit like him?’

Rose smacked me with her hair as she stormed towards the dining hall. Madeline was paler than I’d ever seen her, eyes wide and hands shaking.

‘You could’ve quit the second you started falling for him.’

Madeline looked down at the food she was plating. ‘Thought of it,’ She whispered, ‘Couldn’t.’

I nodded, ‘Wouldn’t.’

Back in the dining hall, Mrs Harmony sat at the head of the table, in her husbands’ chair with her head in her hands. Mr Harmony was looking out of the window and Rose paced the length of the table.

‘You don’t understand,’ Mrs Harmony cried. ‘Staying with

your father is like swallowing broken glass.'

Mr Harmony scoffed.

'Troy was there. I never intended –'

Rose threw her arms wide. 'Why couldn't you tell Arthur?'

Mrs Harmony looked up and leaned back into the chair. 'And risk ruining his inheritance?'

'He would've been happy.'

Mr Harmony sighed, walking back from the window and grabbing a candle from the candelabra at the centre of the table. He ran his hands over it.

'What would you know about your mother's son?'

Rose looked at me. I whistled low and inaudibly. Rose dropped her necklace, straightened her spine and lifted her chin.

'More than you.'

That was when I saw a curl of Nathalie's hair peeking out of the door that would lead to the entryway. I crossed the dining hall without being noticed and slipped through the door. She was there, staring up at the stairs that led to the first floor.

I rested my hand on her shoulder.

'I'm sorry you got caught up in this.'

'As am I.'

'Call the police.'

She looked like she wanted to say something, so I beat her to it.

'I'll make sure it's all over.'

She left without a second word.

Back in the dining hall, Mr Harmony was looking at a window with a cracked pane. The candle he'd been holding was on the floor.

'I knew it!'

Rose was studying her reflection in a wine glass.

'No, you didn't.'

Mrs Harmony gasped, 'Rose, don't talk to your father like that!' 'My father? Are you sure?'

She continued after Mrs Harmony looked down at the table again.

'You honestly thought he would've told you, Father? Nathalie and I are the only people Arthur and Madeline trusted enough to tell. She never wanted the money.'

I slipped back out to the kitchen. Madeline stared at the herb rack, wringing her headscarf through her hands.

'I think you and I both know how this will go.'

She didn't bother to look at me.

'Families stick together. Nathalie will go home. Rose will try and make heaven out of hell. And you?'

Madeline looked at the herb rack. 'You won't be able to convince a jury.'

I'll admit it, it was so difficult to hold in my laughter that I nearly ruptured a blood vessel. 'You think those people will have come from families any different from this one? If this one couldn't tell the difference between hemlock and clover, what makes you think any of them will?'

Madeline thought for a moment. She nodded. She then kissed the headscarf and muttered something into the fabric before folding it neatly and leaving it on the counter.

She didn't put up a fight when the police came to take her. She got arrested for witchery and the murder of poor Arthur. As for Nathalie, she disappeared back to wherever she called home five minutes after the police had gone.

I was packing up my room in the estate when Caroline entered and pressed herself against the only exit. As if she was fully expecting to be able to take me in a fight.

‘One final goodbye?’

‘Why?’

Why? I wouldn’t say it’s an unreasonable question. Why had I bothered with any of this? Any sort of shapeshift is more than the spell itself. The Harmony family is so woven into society that I couldn’t trust any of my old works. Theodore Scythe’s personality took months to create, not to mention memorising the backstory. So, why did I bother?

‘Daddy used to take me to watch the fox hunters. I noticed how, if a fox ever had a kit, then they’d shoot it. The kit would scream; the parent would lose its mind. The hunters always killed the parent fox right away, but I plan on letting myself enjoy this.’

She went to slap me but, I caught her wrist.

‘Did you really think they would’ve killed me, Carol?’

Caroline lowered her hand and stepped back against the door.

‘Sorry?’

‘The witches you handed me to. Oh, they’ll kill children alright, but I’m afraid they’re rather protective of their own kind.’

She paled and started shaking her head.

‘We both know I didn’t get this from you, so, if I were you, I’d be thanking God Rose is Cailio’s too.’

I pushed the last of my things into my bag and hefted it over my shoulder.

‘Thanks for the hospitality. Mummy.’

After I’d barged past her and walked off, she called after me using my real name, which is not something I’m going to tell you. No, I’ve just told you the amount of work that went into Theodore Scythe and I intend to use him for quite some time. So, I think I’ll keep that to myself.

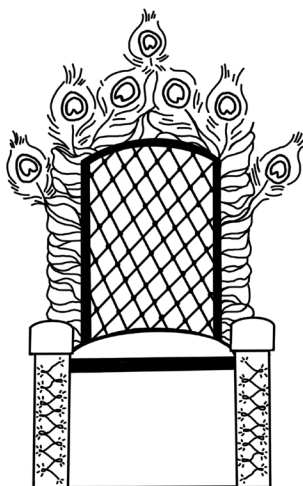
Did you hear what happened to the second son of the Harmony family? Well, we both know the answer to that question. Keep that to yourself though, will you? I mean, you could tell people. There's not a lot I can do to stop you. But I can, and will, make sure no one ever believes you.

To Be King

Kirsten Reason

Kirsten Reason is a writer from Nottingham, studying Creative Writing at the University of Lincoln. Enamoured by fantastical fiction and mysteries, she's currently working on a novel full of magic, quests and clues. When not writing, she can be found tackling one of her many ongoing art projects.

Content warnings: Blood, death.



Cyrus understood why his brother had to be in the room. He did. As their father, King Edward, had told them both on Hugo's eighteenth birthday: it was Hugo's duty as the heir to bear the burdens of their people. Hence, Hugo perched on the Grand Hall's throne, Cyrus hovering behind him, while villagers unloaded their problems for the courts to mend. Cyrus was certain their father had only given that speech so he could retire from the position himself and thrust it onto Hugo without any objections. Everyone knew how pliant his eldest son was at the mere mutterings of royal obligation. However, it *was* tradition for the monarch to bequeath the responsibly to their first-born so they could build their own connection with the kingdom. Therefore, Cyrus had refrained from mentioning how bearing burdens was more the king's duty than the prince's.

If anything, Cyrus was the intruder here. He was the second-born of three – a backup plan. He was supposed to be lounging in the gardens with lords and ladies, sipping sweet wines and citrus teas between shallow conversation. Instead, he rested against a marble pillar, waiting to fix yet another of Hugo's mistakes. He could sketch every intricate peacock feather curled around the pillar from memory, having spent so much time tracing the carvings with his knuckles to stop himself from wincing at his brother.

Hugo steepled his fingers and leaned back against the throne as the final villager, a stocky farmer with copper hair, presented his issue. The deep crimson of Hugo's cloak, embellished with pearls and golden stitching, caused his torso to become lost in the ruby-incrusted backrest.

'Mr Flanagan—'

'Flannery,' Cyrus mumbled, provoking Hugo to flash him a tenth appreciative grin. It made Cyrus wonder whether his neck

hurt from turning his head so often.

‘Mr Flannery, I don’t understand what you’re asking of the court. We can’t help that your cows are producing less milk this spring, nor that the persistent rain has flooded your crops. Acquire new cows? Start again with the crops?’

Mr Flannery’s eye twitched. ‘With the crops underperforming last year, too, we can’t afford it, Your Highness.’

As usual, despite the itch to do something, Cyrus held back from interrupting in the hope that Hugo would take the second chance and offer an actual solution. One day, he told himself, Hugo would say the right thing and Cyrus would be glad he stayed quiet. That wasn’t today.

Cyrus stepped forward. ‘Mrs Tae has a stall in the market selling tonics for animals. She just developed some for optimising the health of livestock, which have proved to be successful. That should fix your cow problem. As for the crops, speak to the Burrows. They had a similar problem a few years ago and managed to get a decent yield.’

Relief softened the crease between Mr Flannery’s eyebrows. ‘Bless you.’ He bowed to Hugo, then Cyrus, and rushed away.

Silence fell across the expanse of the room. It trickled from the chandeliers, cascaded down the dark blue walls glistening jade in the candlelight, and seeped into the floral arches. Hugo’s frustrated groan tore it apart as he dropped his head into his hands.

‘I’ve been doing this for four years and I’m still terrible at it.’

No matter how much Cyrus cared about his brother, he wasn’t going to dispute that. In theory, Hugo was Vasinella’s perfect protector. He was a skilled swordsman, a master of languages, the best trade negotiator the kingdom had ever seen, but he knew nothing about the people he was born to rule over. While Cyrus could de-

scribe the local tavern's Friday seating arrangements and recite the exact order in which the palace cleaner mopped the floors, Hugo could hardly guess which of his knights were parents.

Sometimes, when Hugo seemed his most insensitive, Cyrus had to remind himself that he was destined to be that way. He spent so much of his life training, studying, and attending events overseas that he never had the time to socialise outside of his tutors and the royal court. Their father claimed all there was to being king was preventing war and enforcing laws. Cyrus often wondered what good a king was to a kingdom of strangers.

'You could be worse. You could be shouting abuse or beheading the ones who make absurd requests,' Cyrus said, kicking Hugo's foot to get his attention. It earned him a slap to the arm and a scowl.

'Wonderful. I'm above verbal assault and cold-blooded murder.'

'Indeed. Wonderful.'

The corners of Hugo's mouth quirked into a reluctant smile. He rose from the throne and led them into the hallway, adorned in the same rich colours as the Grand Hall. 'You're better at talking to them than I am. Maybe we should disguise you as me for these things when I'm king. We look similar enough.'

Cyrus pictured it: growing out his brown curls, dyeing them black and creating the illusion of stubble on his tanned skin to look more like Hugo. He was certain impersonating the king was classed as treason, and that he would be caught in an instant. Still, it made him laugh to think about.

'As long as I don't have to participate in any battles or politics. That's your expertise.'

Mischief gleaming in his eyes, Hugo swiped a crystal cande-

labra off a table in passing and pointed it at Cyrus as if it were a weapon. ‘Together we’d make a whole competent monarch.’

The smile on Cyrus’ face tugged into a slanted grin. He grabbed the decorative sword displayed behind him, unsheathed and polished, and jabbed it towards Hugo. He chuckled at the sight. There was no doubt Cyrus was holding it wrong and that his stance was ridiculous, but that was what made these fights all the more entertaining. Hugo swung his candelabra in a clumsy arc he’d never let their father see. Cyrus leapt back to avoid it, almost toppling over because of the weight of his sword. On Hugo’s second lunge, Cyrus turned and sprinted away, cackling as his older brother chased him through the palace like they were children again.

Bursting into the ballroom, Cyrus skidded across the wet floor with flailing arms and came to a stop a few yards in. The fresh, rosy scent of soap clung to the air, meaning he’d just missed the cleaner. It was midday. She would’ve been in Beatrix’s chambers by then. At the slam of the doors, Cyrus whipped around to find Hugo charging in. He raised his sword, and Hugo waved his candelabra in return. However, the moment he pounced to feign left, his shoe slipped and he lurched forward.

Cyrus’ blade plunged into Hugo’s chest on impact. They froze. It wasn’t the sound of metal piercing his heart, or Hugo’s strangled gasp that brought Cyrus back into motion. It was the dimming of Hugo’s eyes, usually wide with energy.

‘What do I do?’ Cyrus whispered, petrified, straining to hold him upright. ‘Do I—’

‘No. Pull it out,’ he slurred. Cyrus tightened his grip on the sword, yanking it free, and Hugo released a gargled shriek. ‘Don’t! I said don’t pull it out!’

Fear took Cyrus by the lungs, squeezed and wrung them of

every breath.

‘Hugo?’ Hugo’s head lolled to the side and Cyrus dropped the blade so he could lower him to the ground. He shook his brother’s shoulders, pleading, ‘Come on. Wake up.’

Hands pressed to Hugo’s chest, Cyrus applied pressure to the wound as if there was a chance to save him. His arms trembled with his sobs. There was too much blood. Cyrus couldn’t tell from looking at him, the colour blending in with Hugo’s red clothes, but he could feel it – a sticky warmth pooling between his fingers, spreading under his palms. It wasn’t going to stop.

Cyrus clamped his eyes shut and took Hugo’s limp hand in his. Maybe if he begged once more, something different would happen.

‘Please. He can’t die.’

He didn’t need to look down to know that Hugo already had.

A shrill screech echoed from the doorway, followed by another, then a cry and a shout. Cyrus turned his head to see a dozen people gathered there, staring at the scene before them in terror. Servants and guards he’d greeted every morning since he was young were either idle or backing away. He didn’t understand. His brother, their prince, was dead and no one was doing anything.

‘He killed him,’ Hugo’s servant breathed, his gaze darting from Cyrus to the sword and Hugo’s corpse. Cyrus felt his body grow frigid. ‘Prince Cyrus killed the crown prince.’

Until two days ago, Cyrus hadn’t so much as ventured into the dungeons. There were much nicer places to be with much nicer people in them. He was glad, in a strange, miserable way, that he didn’t have a reference for what it felt like to be on the other side of the bars. All he knew of the dungeons was his shadowy cell where the

walls were a collage of the palace's scrap wallpaper, the floor was made up of broken tiles, and his bed was a slab of wood pushed to the side. Most of the time, it was a tantalising blur of colour he would mistake as the ballroom through tears. Hugo's lifeless form would materialise at his feet and Cyrus would fall to his knees, blood staining his hands even though they'd been scrubbed clean.

He lay on the bed with his arm hanging off, dragging this thumb across the gaps between the tiles in the hope of grasping something familiar – an action if not a sight or sound. It reminded Cyrus of touching the pillar carvings around Hugo and it made his chest tighten. He'd given up trying to avoid thoughts about his brother. He was scared that if he succeeded, he'd begin to forget things about him and the corpse haunting his existence would become faceless.

The lock to his cell clicked open and a pair of knights hauled him upright, Ingrid and George. Cyrus's shins smacked the edge of the bed, startling a hiss out of him.

'A stab to the heart hurts more,' Ingrid sneered. She jostled him again so his ankle scraped against the wood.

Cyrus sniffled as they cuffed his wrists. 'It was an accident. I didn't kill him.'

George grunted. 'We'll see if the court believes you.'

Making sure to shove him into every available corner in the palace on the way, the knights steered Cyrus through the winding halls. He'd no doubt develop a collection of bruises beneath his garments, still filthy from that day. The doors to the Grand Hall opened to reveal the royal court lined up against the left wall, and villagers against the right. King Edward occupied the throne, a vision of the future his eldest would never have, with his silver-streaked hair, a thick beard, and defined cheekbones. Although

he hid his grief well behind a stoic expression and impeccable posture, Cyrus saw his hands quivering against the armrest the way they had at his wife's funeral. Back then, Edward had waited for the ceremony to be over to retreat to his study and wail.

Had he wept for Hugo yet?

Beatrix, Cyrus' younger sister, stood firm beside their father. Her lips were pursed and her eyes were red-rimmed, like Cyrus expected his own to be. Forced to a stop at the bottom of the steps, Cyrus wanted to gather her in his arms and cry for their brother together. Then, she sprung towards him and Cyrus startled back into the knights.

'How could you?' She spat it with poison as Edward grabbed her black gown and pulled her back next to him.

For the first time since Hugo's death, Cyrus felt something other than grief simmering beneath his skin. To be accused of hurting their brother by Beatrix, someone who knew him better than anyone else in Vasinella, caused a surge of fury within him. Of all people, she should've known.

'I didn't—'

'The court has convened today to determine whether Prince Cyrus is to blame for the death of Prince Hugo. Should he be responsible, his punishment shall be decided by myself and the princess,' Edward bellowed. Beatrix's scowl didn't give Cyrus much hope. 'First, an assessment from the court's physician.'

An older woman, Lucinda, emerged from the left. Her greying chestnut hair was woven into a sleek braid, standing out from her usual clothes – a tattered blue dress with remedy stains on the bodice and scorch marks on the skirts.

'I suspect this is a severe case of Second-born Syndrome, Your Majesty,' she said.

‘Are you certain?’

‘Indeed.’ Lucinda nodded. The stale bread and cheese Cyrus had nibbled for breakfast churned in his stomach. ‘Second-Born Syndrome is characterised by a second-born individual exhibiting envious behaviour towards their older sibling – the family beneficiary. Driven by their craving for power and riches, those effected are prone to thoughts of superiority, sabotaging their sibling’s reputation to reap the benefits, and, in the worst cases, homicidal tendencies. I believe these behaviours align with those of His Royal Highness.’

Cyrus discovered the concept of Second-born Syndrome eight years ago. Hugo was fourteen, he was twelve and Beatrix was eleven. The three of them had been gathered around the table for lunch with their mother, who Cyrus assumed looked upset because Edward had been away in the neighbouring kingdom discussing trade deals. Beatrix hadn’t shared this presumption and had asked their mother why she seemed troubled. Queen Meredith had worried her lip, looking between Hugo and Cyrus, then told them about the princess who was almost drowned by the hands of her sister for the throne. It had been the third instance of violence against first-born in the past month.

The idea that someone could’ve hurt their own Hugo had been absurd to Cyrus and he’d announced so with a determined stab to his potato, which had made his mother smile. He’d vowed that even though he was terrible with a sword, he’d protect his older brother unlike the other horrible second-borns. Beatrix had forced him to promise her, too, just to be certain.

Cyrus didn’t break his vow or his promise. He thrashed in the knights’ hold.

‘Which ones?’ he shouted. ‘Which behaviours of mine sup-

port your outrageous diagnosis?’

Lucinda didn’t flinch at his outburst. ‘I formed my conclusion through the observations of others, Your Highness. Perhaps you should address the rest of the room.’

King Edward gestured for the knights to release him and Cyrus turned to his people with dread. He’d never felt true betrayal until this moment, he was sure. His arms and legs felt paralysed with it. Amongst those present was the seamstress Cyrus shared tea with after the loss of her mother, the cobbler he’d escorted home after a wild night at the tavern, and Mr Flannery from that cursed day.

‘Which behaviours?’ Cyrus croaked.

A servant came forward, twisting and untwisting a grimy cloth. Her voice shook as she spoke. ‘Your face tells many tales, my lord. Your mumbles, too. You thought he’d make a poor king.’

It was a strike to his shoulder, a kick in the kneecaps.

‘I never said that.’ Cyrus searched the crowd for a flicker of faith and, when he found nothing, looked back to his father. Edward’s jaw was clenched, anger seeping through his facade. He’d always hated how Cyrus doubted his methods for preparing Hugo. ‘I didn’t, Father.’

‘You’ve thought it.’

Cyrus was fast to face the servant, but the denial caught in his throat. He had thought it. Every day, Cyrus had watched Hugo fumble the intimacy between the kingdom and the crown, and he’d thought it. Because it was true. The sky was blue and Hugo was going to make a terrible king. That wasn’t a reason for Cyrus to want him dead.

‘He didn’t so much as frequent the market to converse with his people. My brother knew his weaknesses. He knew he wasn’t

worthy of the title yet.'

Anxious chatter erupted amongst their audience and Cyrus could feel Edward's hostile glare on him like a pair of claws in his scalp. The servant raised her voice, a sudden spike of confidence overcoming her. 'So, you thought him inferior?'

'That's not what I'm saying,' Cyrus exclaimed.

'Then what are you saying?'

'He wouldn't make a good ruler, and neither would I.'

'But you would be better?'

'Yes.'

If Cyrus' hands weren't chained behind him, they would've flown to his mouth. Instead, he sucked in a breath as if it would retract his claim, even though everyone had already heard it. The murmurs had perished like a suffocated flame. Eyes wide, the servant retreated from the walkway and tucked herself between the head cook and the stable boy. Cyrus pivoted, heart pounding, and recoiled at the scene before him: Edward clutching his armrests with white knuckles, and Beatrix flushed scarlet with clenched fists at her sides. Meanwhile, Lucinda scribbled notes on the parchment she kept tied to her waist, squinting at Cyrus rather than focussing on the movements of her quill.

'Only because I know Vasinella more than he did,' Cyrus cried. He tried to approach his father, just to be barged down the steps by a guard. Undeterred, he shot Edward a hardened look. 'I don't want to be king.'

Edward sniffed.

'The second characteristic: sabotage of the reputation. Anyone with knowledge of this, step forward.'

Timid footsteps followed his order, a swarm of villagers from what Cyrus could distinguish by sound alone. He kept his back to

them. The servant had said his face told tales, so the people deciding Cyrus's fate were going to witness it this time.

'The month before last, the princes fought in the village square,' someone announced. 'Prince Hugo had been trying to make an arrest and Prince Cyrus had shouted insults at him, punched him, until he relented. Everyone saw.'

Cyrus flinched – a fatal move under the watch of his father. Hugo's taunting image appeared sitting at Edward's feet. He was wrapping himself in a pitiful embrace, identical to how Cyrus had found Hugo after their fight that day in the village. Rather than blood crusted underneath Cyrus' fingernails, this hallucination came with the stinging touch of a bruise across his right hand. Hugo had had a matching one on his collarbone which Cyrus had apologised for until it'd faded to a murky yellow. He'd been sorry about the bruise, though he'd never apologised for punching Hugo. He still wouldn't, not even to the manifestation in front of him. It was what needed to be done.

'They were children, Father. They didn't know the flowers they were selling were an endangered species. Hugo was going to drag them to the dungeons.'

Edward's chin raised from the ivory fur lining of his velvet cape. 'As he should've. You're never too young to become acquainted with the law.' Pride laced his words as it often did when he talked about Hugo. At least one thing was the same after his death.

Apart from Lucinda, who was focused only on observing Cyrus, a heavy weight of discomfort held the room hostage. Even Beatrix shifted with a wary look to the throne.

Hugo's image lifted an eyebrow at Cyrus, pointing his thumb at Edward. *See? I did what I was taught.*

'They were starving and needed the coins. It wasn't right.'

Cyrus scoured the crowd of villagers from over his shoulder, catching a few hesitant but agreeing nods. 'So, I told Hugo he was being cruel and, when he went to bind their wrists, I punched him.'

Hugo had been so taken aback and wounded by Cyrus's behaviour that he'd let the children go and retreated to the palace with the entire village square watching him. After calming down, Cyrus had joined him in this room, sat on the steps and bowed his head as Hugo asked whether Cyrus truly thought he was cruel. Cyrus hadn't. Hugo was schooled to do cruel things but hadn't yet been consumed by the beliefs that accompanied them. When Cyrus had told his brother that, it seemed to rattle him. Hugo had rubbed his collarbone and swore he'd be better. In some ways, he had been.

The king stood from the throne and prowled down the cerulean carpet dividing the room, raw hatred in the twitch of his upper lip. Cyrus tried to shuffle away but the knights blocked him from moving back further than a few paces. The second they swerved out of his path, Edward's fist collided with his jaw and Cyrus hit the ground with a painful thud.

'You humiliated him. Belittled him in front of the kingdom,' Edward seethed.

Cyrus's face throbbed.

'That wasn't my intention.'

Wasn't it though?

He could've explained to Hugo what was wrong, handled the situation in hushed tones rather than biting shouts. But something within Cyrus needed his brother to be mortified. Staring up at their father with damp cheeks, ringing ears and the taste of metal in his mouth, Cyrus saw a flicker of what Hugo could've become in Edward, and he finally understood what had driven him to attack

Hugo in the village square. It was the horror of knowing that another Edward would be king one day unless Cyrus intervened.

‘We were play-fighting. He slipped. I don’t have Second-born Syndrome and I didn’t kill him,’ Cyrus panted from the floor. It felt weaker than his previous declarations. ‘Please.’

Looming over him, Edward’s expression scrunched in disgust and Cyrus expected to receive a kick in the stomach just for fun. Then his father directed his attention to Beatrix, who seemed more deflated than before.

‘And what of his homicidal tendencies?’ Edward demanded.

Beatrix’s voice was hollow and her stare was distant.

‘You know the cleaner’s schedule, Cyrus. You led him to a room you knew would be wet, armed with a sword you chose.’

Cyrus felt like there was a dagger against his throat. Everything she said was true. He thought of his contempt towards Hugo failing to connect with his people, of the satisfaction that fluttered in his chest when he’d punched him in public, of the unsheathed sword and the slippery tiles he’d acknowledged and ignored. He hadn’t even called for help as Hugo bled out, had he? Cyrus loved him and he’d pulled the sword out of his body, sealing his fate.

What had he done?

‘I didn’t mean to.’ Cyrus heaved a sob.

‘You’re lucky there isn’t a dagger in my hand,’ Edward hissed.

Waving her notes through the air, Lucinda hurried to his side, seeming both fascinated and frazzled.

‘Your Majesty, I’d like to revoke my initial diagnosis. Individuals with Second-born Syndrome aren’t known to exhibit such genuine distress. I believe we’re witnessing a sister illness—’ The parchment was snatched from her grasp and flung away with a huff.

‘I don’t care what it is. I want him dead!’

Cyrus was numb to the news – too beaten, scorched, and scratched by his grief to care about himself. He didn’t know what there was to care about anyway and he was sure no one else did either. The Grand Hall had been reduced to stunned mutters and terrified whimpers. As the knights escorted him through the ruins of his relationships and to the dungeons without speaking a word, Cyrus wondered whether his father would forbid the executioner from sharpening his axe the next day.

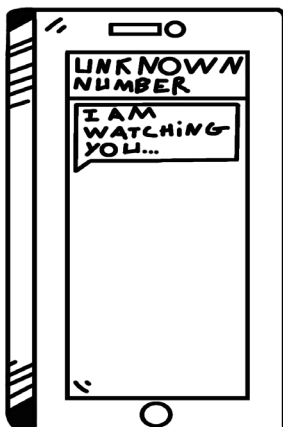
He hoped Hugo would forgive him on the other side of the veil for breaking his vow.

In My Proximity

Amelia Ellis

Amelia Ellis is a Lincoln based writer, currently studying Creative Writing. She can be found curled up with a fantasy novel, a cup of tea and her cats. When she isn't reading, she can be found hard at work, pursuing her dream of being a writer.

Content warnings: Psychological abuse, emotional distress, themes of control and fear.



One hundred and fifty-two days, nine hours, three minutes and twenty-six seconds. That's how long I've been trapped down here in this cold basement. My right arm is chained to a rusty old pipe that runs along the stone wall behind me. I'm slouched against the wall on the damp concrete floor, wearing nothing but a flimsy white mini dress he picked out for me. I can't remember the last time I wasn't shivering. The only light in the room is the dim yellow lightbulb buzzing from the ceiling. I let out a tired sigh, looking down at my skinny fingers. I pick at the chipped nail polish on my thumb that I've been trying to rip off for the past two days but can't seem to tear away. It's hard to believe that six months ago today I would have been kidnapped by my stalker and chained to his basement wall.

Kai comes down here everyday. Or so he says. I don't even know what time of day it is. All I know is that the heavy footsteps above me and the deep humming of the same tune getting closer to the basement door means he's about to come in. Usually it's for food or a long chat about how his day has gone, or how much his boss has pissed him off. A wave of exhaustion washes over me, and I fight to keep my eyes open. I get tired a lot when I'm down here, even though I do nothing but sit and stare at a wall all day. But I've noticed I'm getting drowsier recently. Kai's noticed too, but he's not done anything to help me. I don't blame him though, because what can he do? I've given up asking to be set free. I've given up on everything. My thoughts are cut off when I hear the familiar sound of footsteps above me.

'Eleanor,' Kai sings from behind the door.

The sound of locks clicking echoes through the basement. My vision starts to blur as my body forces me to sleep. My eyelids grow heavy as I watch the door creak open. My head sags forward

as I hear a deep sigh, along with his footsteps creeping towards me.

‘Oh dear, don’t fall asleep on me yet my love,’ he says under his breath. It’s almost as if he’s saying it to himself. The last thing I feel is his rough hand gently lifting my chin up, before finally giving in to exhaustion.

Six Months Earlier

‘Hey, are you listening?’

I blink at the hand wafting up and down in front of my face. Once it’s pulled away, I’m back to staring at the old drunk customer sat at the bar in front of me. He rests his shiny bald head onto his hand and stares up at me with half lidded eyes.

‘Eleanor.’

I turn my head to the voice coming from my right to see Mia standing there with a wine bottle in her hand, her brows drawn together as she stares back at me. Her black curly hair is styled into a bob with a plain purple headband that does little to push the small strands of hair out of her face.

‘Where did you go?’

‘Sorry what?’

‘You were staring at that guy for a good thirty seconds.’

I look back to the man in front of me, giving him an apologetic smile. He doesn’t even acknowledge it as he continues to play his staring game with me. I scrunch my face up as I look back to Mia and see she’s also staring at him with a frown. She slowly turns her head back to me, placing the wine bottle down onto the counter.

‘Anyways, I was asking what time we’re meeting Luca and Noah.’

‘Didn’t we plan just after five or something?’

‘I think so. Couldn’t remember. We’re still going to that café downtown, right? The one we both wanted to try.’

I give her a warm smile as I nod. To be honest, I couldn’t care less if we went to that café or not. I’m only making it look like I want to go because I know how much she wants to go. I also know she didn’t really forget what time we’re going out – that’s just her way of playing it cool. On the inside she’s probably jumping up and down with excitement. I need to get out of the damn house anyway. I’ve been glueing my head to my books for long enough now. I open my mouth to say something else but I’m cut off by the staring man at the bar.

‘Hey, blondie. Another beer,’ he slurs, sniffing his nose.

I frown at his rudeness, glancing down to see if I have my name tag on. Which I indeed do. I look at Mia and see her biting her lip to stifle her laugh, as she turns to serve another customer.

‘It’s Eleanor,’ I say between gritted teeth, turning back to the customer as I put on the best fake smile I can muster.

He hiccups as he scratches his bald head, blinking slowly at me. He licks his bottom lip under his thick white moustache that completely covers his top lip. He leans forward onto the table, narrowing his eyes at me.

‘What?’

‘My name. It’s Eleanor.’

He hiccups for the second time, sliding his empty pint glass towards me with the back of his hand. He’s obviously not listening to a word I say. I don’t even know why I bother correcting him. Just like everyone else in here, he’s too drunk to function. I’ve never understood people who drink themselves stupid like this guy. It doesn’t even feel that good to be drunk. At least it doesn’t to me.

‘Coming right up,’ I mutter.

I turn to the beer tap to refill his drink. That’s when I feel the familiar shiver running up my spine and to the back of my neck. He’s watching me again, my stalker. Kai, he calls himself. Although I’m not sure that’s his real name. It would be weird if it was, and he revealed it to me that easily. For a year now, he’s been sending me weird gifts and notes that smell of strong cologne and cigarettes. He’s never actually met me in person, but I’m determined to know what he looks like.

I pull the lever down on the beer tap as my gaze roams around the pub. People are huddled together in small groups, laughing and joking over the low rumble of the music playing in the background. But I don’t see anyone staring at me. I don’t even know what I’m going to do once I see him. Is it safe to confront him? Clearly not. *I mean come on Eleanor, if he’s stalking you, he obviously wants to hurt you.* My heart thumps in my ears as I look at every corner and crook of the pub, but I don’t see anyone. *Where are you, Kai?*

‘You’re wasting the beer.’

I look down on instinct, just noticing the beer overflowing in the glass. I let go of the lever as if I’ve been burned, placing the beer down onto the mat in front of the drunk customer. He’s still staring at me, his mouth now hanging open.

‘I’m so sorry. If you just give me a minute, I’ll go get a napkin to wipe that down,’

Before I can move, he picks up the beer and begins to drink from it, ignoring my words. I stand there, watching him in disbelief and not knowing how to react. *I hate my damn job.*

‘El, are you ok?’ Mia asks me as she places her hand onto my arm.

‘I’m fine.’

‘Is it that creep again? You’ve got that look on your face you usually have when you’re nervous.’

I don’t say anything as I look back at the busy pub around us one last time before looking back at her. I brush my hair back, avoiding eye contact as I nod once. Her face softens as she lets out a quiet tut. Mia knows the idea of this guy watching me all the time creeps me out. There’s been moments I’ve had severe panic attacks from certain gifts he’s given me, like pieces of my cut off hair, or photos of me sleeping at night. Just the idea of him gives me the shivers. She’s been there to comfort me every time I’ve struggled with this, and I love her for that.

I know what you’re thinking. Why haven’t I been to the police? Apparently, I need ‘proper evidence’ to prove that this is really happening, and I’m not lying to frame someone. Even though I’ve shown them the pieces of my cut off hair, and the creepy photos of myself asleep that Kai leaves on my bedside table every other night, there still isn’t enough evidence to prove it’s not me doing this. So for now, I’m on my own until I find out who it is.

‘We’ll figure this out. Stop worrying.’

‘How can I stop worrying? It’s been a year and nothing’s happened.’

She goes silent and looks down at the floor between us. It’s obvious she doesn’t know what to say. She never knows what to say about this. I love her for always being there for me, but I have also noticed the number of times she’s repeated herself to me to try and calm me down. It’s starting to get old.

‘Exactly, there’s nothing we can do.’

‘Look, I know you don’t want to tell anyone about this. But why don’t we talk to the guys when we meet up? They might know something.’

‘Not a chance,’ I snap.

‘But we’re getting nowhere with this. What harm is it going to do by telling them?’

‘They’re obviously going to laugh at me.’

‘Are you kidding me? They’re our best friends, El. What makes you even think that? Plus, Luca cares for you a lot, he’ll definitely help you.’

My brows snap together at her words. There’s no way in hell she’s saying what I think she’s saying. By the smirk that’s slowly creeping up her lips, I already have my answer.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Oh, come on, you don’t mean to tell me that you haven’t realised Luca has feelings for you?’

‘What?’ I squeak as my heart drops.

‘Wow, you really are clueless. He’s liked you practically since he laid eyes on you.’

Oh, hell. I’ve known Mia and Noah since we were twenty-one – five years later and we’re inseparable. We met Luca two years ago at a club downtown, and we all found out we had a lot in common with him. Since then, we’ve all been pretty close. We’ve also all never had any kind of feelings for each other, which is why it’s never crossed my mind that Luca might have feelings for me.

‘You shouldn’t have told me. Now whenever we talk it’s going to be awkward,’ I groan as I bury my face into my hands.

Mia bursts out laughing. ‘Don’t you dare tell him I told you that.’

‘Oh, for god’s sake. Why didn’t he tell me? It’s kind of weird how he’s liked me for two years and hasn’t shown any signs.’

‘I mean look how you’re acting now. I don’t blame the poor guy. You’ve practically got disgust written all over your face.’

She's not wrong. I have no interest in Luca whatsoever, and honestly I find the guy very awkward and creepy. Even though we're close friends, there's something about him that makes me not want to be in a room alone with him. I'm about to say something when our boss Kelly cuts me off by clapping her hands in between our faces.

'Ladies, please. Stop talking and get working.'

I jolt backwards, putting a hand onto my chest. My heart thumps as I look at Kelly, wide-eyed. Kelly doesn't even look phased, though. Her eyebrows are risen, and her hair is tied up into a tight ponytail. Her irritating high-pitched voice echoes through the loud pub, causing some customers go quiet.

'Your shifts end in ten minutes. You can chit-chat after.'

Kelly gives me a wink as she turns around back to her job, and I smile and do the same thing. Yet I can't help but feel uneasy, that same pair of eyes burning through me.

Fifteen minutes later, I'm walking out of the building with Mia, my handbag draped over my shoulder. I'm out of my work uniform and wearing a casual pair of navy-blue flared jeans. I pair this with a white tight fitted shirt and my black cropped leather jacket. My light blond hair is now tied up into a high ponytail, with loose strands on either side of my face. Mia stands next to me, also out of her work uniform in a pair of black flared jeans and a long sleeve black top. She's still wearing her plain purple headband. She's staring down at the time on her phone with her eyes narrowed.

'They should be here any minute now. I told them to meet us here at about this time.'

I stare off into the busy street, looking for any sign of them,

but I see nothing. I open my mouth to say something, but I'm cut off when a hand grabs the back of my collar and yanks me backwards. My eyes widen and I gasp as I stumble. Just before I stumble backwards too far and fall onto my arse, another hand shoots out and nudges me forward. A deep snicker can be heard as I regain my balance.

I spin around and come face to face with Noah. He's got his usual confident smirk on his face. He has short blond hair with brown eyes. Noah's always had that charming look about him. The one that makes women look twice. It's actually quite annoying for us, as every time we're out together as a group, we always have to stop while he gives random girls his number. He's such an attention seeker, but he's also my best friend and I love him. I have to crane my neck back to look up at him with how tall he is.

'You twat!' I slap his arm hard.

He doesn't even acknowledge it, laughing as he shoves his hands into his grey jogger pockets. Luca stands at his side and gives me a shy smile. Luca is the total opposite to Noah, with his black shaggy hair that falls over his green eyes like a mop. His whole outfit screams emo, with his black denim jeans and black T-shirt. Seriously, the guy doesn't know colour. Mia steps forward next to me as she looks at them both.

'Took you guys long enough.'

'We're on time, aren't we?' Noah asks as he pulls out his phone to check the time.'

'Mia's just annoyed that you're not here bang on time.'

'They're two minutes late.'

'You can't expect us to sit on our arses and wait around for you both until you finish,' he says as he steps in front of her, sizing her up. Mia and Noah always do this – they bicker for ages, and

usually I have to step in between them when things get a little too heated. I step back next to Luca as they argue. I glance up at him and tense when I see he's already staring down at me.

'Everything okay?'

He flinches, looking the other way.

'Fine,' he mutters.

Erm, okay, weirdo. Luca's always had this weird, strange habit of staring at me when I'm not looking, and if he's not staring, it's usually the habit of finding the excuse to touch me. It makes me feel so uncomfortable at times.

I can just make out the faint blush on the side of his cheek as he shows me the back of his head, staring off somewhere else. I narrow my eyes as I try to make out what he's doing.

'Are we going to this stupid café or what?'

Me and Luca snap our heads towards Mia's voice. She's standing next to Noah while they both stare at us in complete silence now. I don't miss the way Noah's smirking at Luca.

'About that—' Luca trails off, not finishing what he's saying.

'We're going to Luca's place instead.' Noah finishes for him with a smirk.

'Sorry, what?' Mia asks as she turns her head up at Noah with a glare.

'I forgot my wallet,' Luca mutters as he scratches the back of his head.

'Great. Just great. Why didn't you both just go and pick it up before meeting us?'

Luca doesn't say anything as he looks down at his feet, sucking his bottom lip between his teeth. He does that a lot when he's feeling shy. Luca's the anxious one out of all of us, if you haven't noticed yet. He hardly talks, and if he does, it usually comes out in

a stutter. I feel a flicker of sympathy for him as I take in his awkward body language.

‘Jesus Mia, lighten up. We’re just going to pop round to his house, pick up his wallet, and then go wherever it is you want to go. Stop being so difficult,’ Noah snaps as he looks back down at her. His eyes flicker to Luca for a split second before he looks back at her. He can tell she’s making him nervous too.

‘I’m being difficult? You’re one to talk, coming here unprepared and then deciding to drag us with you to pick up your shit.’

Then come the swear words, and now it’s my turn to intervene. ‘Okay, calm down. We’ll go to Luca’s and pick up his wallet. No worries.’

I don’t miss the way Luca looks at me in the corner of my eye. The way his eyebrows raise, and the feel of his hand brushing against mine. My heart drops, but I mask it as I look to Mia, giving her a pointed look. She goes to argue back but I widen my eyes at her, shaking my head, signalling for her to drop it before she causes a scene. She snaps her mouth shut, thinning her lips and puffing out her cheeks. I look at Noah and see he’s grinning at her.

‘Noah,’ I warn.

He snaps his gaze to me and his smile drops as I give him a warning glare. I then turn my head back to Luca and smile.

‘Ready?’

‘Y- yes,’ he stutters as he straightens up, giving me a single nod.

He walks on down the street, but not before brushing his shoulder against mine. It was obvious that that was deliberate, but like always, I don’t comment on it. We all trail behind him as he pulls out his phone. He furrows his brows and begins to tap away on it.

‘Arse,’ Mia grumbles.

‘Bitch,’ Noah mutters.

‘God, stop it!’ I shout as I spin around to face them.

They both look up at me with innocent smiles on their faces. I’m about to speak when my phone buzzes in my back pocket. I turn back around to see Luca’s still walking up ahead, so I have to speed walk to catch up to him. I pull out my phone to check the message. My heart sinks when I see it. It’s from Kai.

Kai: You look gorgeous as always today, my love. But I prefer your hair when it’s down.

I lift my head from my phone, looking around the busy street we’re on. He’s never texted me before. How did he even get my number? I can’t seem to hear anything as my heart thumps in my ears. My breathing becomes erratic. I begin to feel that same pair of eyes burning through me again. My hands tremble around my phone.

‘Hey, you ok?’

Mia steps in front of me, lowering her head to the side to catch my gaze. I lock eyes with her and my heart rate begins to settle. I know she suggested we tell the guys about Kai, but I’m just not ready yet.

‘I’m fine.’

Luca walks up beside Mia and looks down at me with a frown. ‘You sure? You don’t look so good.’

Noah steps beside Luca and looks at me with the same concerned expression as everyone else. My cheeks begin to heat up as I feel very small and vulnerable right now. Luca narrows his eyes at Noah’s hand when he reaches out and holds my arm but softens his expression when he notices I’m staring. He smiles at me but I don’t return it. Over the past couple of months, I’ve noticed Luca

giving people weird looks if they ever lay a finger on me. No matter how close I am with them, it's always the same. As if he's ready to pounce on them at any second. It unsettles me. Although Mia did say he has feelings for me, so it could just be from jealousy, I think.

'Let's just hurry up and get to Luca's place. You look like you need a glass of water or something,' Noah says as he studies my expression.

I nod and brush the hair out of my face, sucking in as many deep breaths as possible. Luca turns back around to lead the way. Noah and Luca begin to chat with one another, as Mia and I follow together behind. I stare at the floor, still a little shaken from the message. I occasionally look around to see if anyone's staring at us.

'Is it him again?' Mia whispers as she nudges my arm.

I glance up at the two from behind to check they aren't listening. Noah's in the middle of showing Luca something on his phone, while Luca chuckles under his breath at it. I take my phone out, tapping on the message, and handing it to her with trembling hands. I watch as her face goes from worry to horror in the span of five seconds. She whips her head back to me, while her mouth gapes open and her eyes widen. I've never seen her look at me like that before.

'Oh my god,' she breathes as she looks back down at my phone, reading the message again and again, as if it's going to change if she keeps reading it. She then does exactly what I did and glances around the street.

'You won't spot him, he's good at hiding.'

I begin to feel that familiar sensation of pins and needles in my throat. Tears well up in my eyes as she turns her head back to me.

‘What do I do?’ My voice breaks as I ask her the same question I’ve been constantly asking her for the past year. Her face softens and she stops us from walking.

‘Oh El,’ she whispers as she pulls me into a tight hug. My hands tremble as I grip her waist like a lifeline. I finally break as the pain in my throat becomes unbearable. Tears spill down my face and drip onto her shirt. I sniffle my nose as she rubs my back.

‘Mia, I need you to help me. I seriously don’t know what to do anymore,’ I mumble into her shoulder.

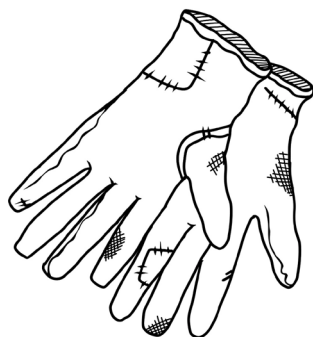
She pulls away, holding onto my arms as she looks me in the eye. ‘We’re going to stop this guy, El. That’s what we’re going to do. This ends now, and I promise you I’ll help make sure of it.’

Tapestries in Woven Blood

Domi Gentowska

Domi Gentkowska is a Polish writer studying Creative Writing at the University of Lincoln. Previously published with *First Story* in ‘The Little Book of Spells’ anthology, when not writing she can be found flitting between DIY projects, discovering weird flavours of tea or adding to her jewellery collection.

Content warnings: Violence (blood, gore, murder, death), mentions of child trafficking and abuse, mentions of prostitution.



Outside our attic window, the late September sun is coming out of hiding behind the tall townhouses, burning through the morning fog. We're lucky to have a window. Most folks barely have a room. Ours is bare apart from the bed, leaks in rain and smells like the street but it's shelter.

My legs cramp from hours spent curled by the window, waiting for Fran to appear out the alley corner. She left late, like usual, to the brothel house. The Madame keeps her 'til the early hours, but never the morn. She has others for that.

Covered fingers shoving needle through rough linen, I try my best to stay focused on what I'm doing. Years of sewing have sharpened my visions, and now a touch with my bare hand to cloth is all I need to see its past. I can't let my mind wander right now. With each stitch my stomach squirms. I don't have enough coin to provide for myself. My sister's work keeps us both alive.

Should I wait a little more? What if I leave and she returns to an empty room?

Hinges squeal, the trapdoor slamming open. The slab of wood thuds against the floor, marking a new dent to join the rest. Fran's hair is flat with grease and dirt. She likes to put it up, says it gets caught on stuff too easy, but it hangs in her face, loose around her shoulders. The brown colour dulls her skin, worse in the small light the window allows.

Every rung on the ladder she climbs shows more of her: the wrinkled blouse with missing buttons and soaked under the arms with old sweat, the wool skirt chewed through with moth bites. Fran avoids my outstretched hand, twisting herself away. My ability to read past events from her clothing has always terrified her. In our younger years, when Mam still lived, Fran would cry if she made us hold hands on walks.

Now, she makes sure to separate our space, so we don't have reason to touch. She won't even let me patch the holes in her skirt.

'I worried you'd left me alone.'

'Don't be daft,' Fran says.

'But you're never this late. I had half a mind to tell the bobbie on our corner.'

She laughs, a weak huff under her breath. 'Waste of time. They don't care 'bout us, Ettie, you know that.' Her steps are uneven as she edges over to lay on the lone bed, heels leaving prints on the wood along the way. I still can't get a glimpse of her face. 'Only thing they're good for is their pockets.' The hay rustles under her weight. She turns to the wall.

I shuffle to sit closer. Fran flinches. I stop, instead leaning back against the frame, watching her begin to settle.

Gently, so she won't notice, I start to play with her skirt. A pungent smell hits my nose, iron and waste, but I don't say anything. Fran wouldn't want to know. 'What happened?'

'Since when's it your business? Drop it. Go work on your sewing.'

Fran goes quiet. I know she won't talk again. Though a look at her day will tell me all I need, what she needs from me. I must read her clothes. My glove feels damp inside as I slide it off my fingers. I pause, hovering my fingertips over the wool. It's itchy against my fingertips. I hover there, my touch lighter than a cobweb. My eyes close.

Colour hammers into my sight, a murky mess that sharpens to a cobblestone road and brick walls. The alley I find my vision set in looks like an overgrown grave – empty, soulless, and haunted. A lantern standing nearby cuts a feeble circle of yellow onto the stone floor, washing over a pair of dirty laced shoes. I follow them up a woman's back, covered with matted brown hair. She's

dressed in a cloak, with the same pattern as the one gifted by Mam. Even the slope of the shoulder matches. It's Franny. And laying there under her feet is a body, in a puddle of sewage and...blood. Jutting cheekbones and a pockmarked chin is all I can make out, the rest hidden in shadow or covered by red.

Its face looks familiar. Like the mutton shunter that prowls the work-house from time to time, lingering outside the gates like a horsefly choosing the best prize. I remember the way he used to order the girls to the station with him. Telling us about his war medals, lip all curled but eyes hungry.

Crisp footsteps approach, a pale hand sliding onto Fran's shoulder. She hangs her head, a brick dripping in her loose grasp. Dark drops plop onto the corpse's forehead.

'Policemen are all pigs, Fran. He deserved it.' The new figure leans in to whisper into Fran's ear. 'You have a sister, do you not? Imagine what he could have done to a helpless young girl. Think of Ettie.'

Ripping myself back into the present, I find myself gripping her skirt. The voice I heard in my vision echoes through my head. I can't seem to let her go. The hold gives me away.

Fran fumbles to slap my hand off, dragging herself to the other side of the bed. Her eyes glow through the curtain of her hair. They're fixed on my uncovered skin.

'What did you see?' she asks. If I tell, she might leave again.

'Nothing. I didn't see a thing. Want some bread?'

Giving her a sweet smile, I shove my fingers back into my glove. It's a familiar cage and feels like a prison sentence.

Hinges creak throughout the room. Daylight has gone, the candle in the corner long cold. There's movement in the dark, the rustling of clothes brushing against skin. It's not time for Fran to leave for the brothel.

After the events of yesterday, I'm aware of her every move. Is she really capable of such a thing, taking someone's life like that? And what about the body? It's not possible for a person, an officer nonetheless, to disappear as if they never existed. My sister doesn't have the power.

Of course, it's no secret Fran has a temper. It might not always be for a great reason that she releases her anger at strangers, but I don't imagine her job is easy on the soul. This neighbourhood crawls with scum and cruel men are here by the dozen. Every year, we plan our escape to a nicer place, but the coin won't make itself, as Fran says. During the winter we rely on the community to survive, when my fingertips are too frozen to stitch and the brothel is lacking in patrons.

Footsteps approach the trapdoor in the corner of the room. She leaves; the delicate snick of the lock ticking over is the only evidence of her absence. Shoving my gloves into my front pocket, I follow right behind, keeping her in my line of sight. It doesn't matter how fast she walks. The streets in our area are full of drunks and other ladies of the night, but we grew up here, and I know the roads and shortcuts well. Until she passes the bakers, the shop that borders the safe districts from the seedy.

Is she meeting clients outside her hours?

Fran turns the corner, disappearing behind a crumbled brick wall off to the side. I scuttle up to where she passed by, resting my back against the building attached. The jagged bricks catch on the fabric of my skirt, as if to tell me to stay, to remain naive and pretend I didn't see my sister commit a crime severe enough to justify a one-way trip to the afterlife.

It's silent.

Leaning out past the edge, I weigh up the danger. The alleyway

is cramped, rotting doors lined up on either side leading to a dead end. The only visible light comes from an upstairs window, wisps of glowing mist displayed around Fran. She's stopped at a black door, polished with an elaborate brass handle. She knocks and enters. Up close, I recognise the placement of the lantern hanging from one of the walls.

Two voices drift through the door. One loud, one not more than a mutter. I strain against the frame, trying to make out the words.

‘...your sworn duty...do not forget I hold the cards.’

My head presses into the wood.

A body rams me into the door, a dirty hand pushing me inside. The other grips my elbow, squeezing harder. I get a second to find the hands belong to a ragged middle-aged man.

‘Pard’n me, Mistress. Found this rat hoverin’ outside,’ the man croaks in my face, grinning teeth ruined by tobacco.

I’m so distracted by his stink I almost miss the two others in the room. We’re in what could’ve been a decent living area if not for the stained wallpaper and poorly stripped floor. The only objects still standing are an empty table with one seat. Sitting in the chair is a woman with a shape resembling a willow tree. Graceful lines contrast the loose clothing draping her figure. She looks every bit an angel, her blonde hair straight silk in the candlelight. It’s the woman from the vision.

‘Then do get rid of it. I have no time for your nonsense, Jack.’

Compared to her, Fran reminds me of a declawed cat, displeasure obvious, but her presence is muted. I’d think her possessed if I didn’t know the position she is in. It’s too late to back down.

‘As you command, Mistress,’ Jack says, throwing my body to the ground.

I grunt, winded from the force. He climbs onto my back with the enthusiasm of a hunting dog sounding out its kill. Struggling only leads to my arms bound and locked in place behind me. I'm stuck. He laughs, enjoyment ringing from the sound.

'Fran!'

No response. She's facing away, a grimace on her face. I see. It's up to me to free myself.

I grab at the man's wrist, brushing his sleeve. Straining my ability isn't something I've ever done, not to this extent. I search through his life for snippets of the woman.

This vision feels recent. Euphemia and Jack wear the same clothing. We're in the same room but light shines on the wall, showing stains that the present darkness hides. Sitting around the table are older men and women. They're all dressed posh, with clean skin and tamed hair. Stacks of gold coins line the edges of the wood, a pile in front of each seat.

A middle-aged man in a thick coat places down a small handful. 'I want the best you have, Madame. The other one died on me last night,' he sneers, whiskers twitching.

Euphemia smiles, waving Jack forward. She looks up at him. 'You heard the gentleman. Bring her over.'

I move to another time. Still in the room, but further in the past. They're planning out acts of rebellion, discussing police patrols. Fran stands in the corner, head bowed. The vision focuses on papers held in Jack's hand. One page details a face sketch of an older man in uniform with bushes for brows and a stubborn chin. Next to it, a small painting of a young girl with the woman. There're frown lines etched on her skin that don't belong on someone so young. Her eyes are haunted.

Fran's voice snaps me back. 'Madame Euphemia, I can do this. We don't need her,' Fran says. I look up from the floor to find her eyes fixed on me with her fists clenched.

Euphemia scoffs. 'If it were that easy, I would not have need of you, dear.'

After what I saw, the need to get us both out of here prickles. A plan starts to form in my mind. 'The Sergeant took your daughter. You want revenge. Fran and I can distract him for you, get him alone.' My heartbeat pulses under my jaw, a steady rhythm. A shiver racks my spine. The longer I speak, the more my voice firms, nerves falling away.

The woman turns to Fran, disbelief written in the puckered line of her mouth. 'How dare you. Should I sew your lips shut? Perhaps then you wouldn't share private matters with others.' She approaches Fran, lifting her hand to strike. I thrash harder against the floor. Fran begins to shake her head at me. The knee on my back digs in harder, and my legs start to throb.

'I can help! I can find them for you,' I gasp out. All noise stops.

Leather heels approach from the corner of my eye, neat clacks against old concrete. Euphemia's beauty withers as she shoots me a smirk. For the first time since I was forced to enter, I realise perhaps Fran was right to be silent.

'I wonder. Will you be as capable as your sister? How interesting.' She considers us both. After a tense moment, she walks back to the table. I let out a shaky breath, slumping. 'Alright. But remember this: betrayal comes back a hundred-fold. There is no escape from me,' she warns, hand waving in dismissal. 'Jack.'

The grip on my arms loosens and the man steps away, leaving me sprawled. I don't have the strength to move from the ground.

'Tomorrow night, by the forest. I will be waiting,' Euphemia sings as she swings open another door. 'I trust you know the consequences should you fail.'

Jack trails over to her side, a pout clear on his ugly features. They're quite the pair. Soulmates, one could say. Fran doesn't lift her head until Euphemia disappears from sight. I take the spare minute to catch my breath.

'She's lying, Fran.' I keep my words to a whisper, terrified that she'll return and gut me for it.

Nothing happens. I finally feel safe enough to attempt getting back up, but I lose my footing and nearly topple right down. Fran catches me, pulling at my elbow until I stand, then letting go. Keeping a few steps apart.

'Where are your gloves?' Fran asks. Too busy searching the ground for the useless things, moments pass before realisation scrunches her brow. 'Hold on. You saw it?'

I nod. 'We'll have to go to him. If anyone can stop them, it'll be a Sergeant. Who better than the one they're after?'

'Ettie, no. He can't know! I'll be put behind bars, and we'll never see each other again. She pays well. You can't survive by yourself.' She looks pained at the thought.

'But don't you get it, Fran? It's perfect. They'll take care of each other, and, while they're in the thick of it, we can leave. I would never sell you out like that,' I plead to her. 'Trust me.'

She thinks on it for a while, looking troubled.

'How else are we to stop all this?' I decide to give the idea one last push. 'I'm sure you don't want to be one of her toys that she uses and scraps.' It's a jab below the belt, I know. Her thunderous expression confirms it.

Fran sighs. She pinches the bridge of her nose, shoulders drooping. 'What's the plan?'

I smile in relief, 'I'll take the bobbie. You just pass the news on to our "Mistress".'

I watch as people of all sorts walk by. Faces smeared with dirt, a few couples here and there dancing around beggars in street corners. A waft of warm baked treats drifts past, making my belly twist with hunger. I'm covered by the shadows of the fading sun, listening in through the window cracked open behind me as men dart around inside. Every squeak of the door opening builds tension in my spine.

A familiar dark coat littered with medals on the chest catches my eye. The bobbie turns my way, square jaw tensed under a pair of cautious dark eyes. 'Do you often skulk around police stations, Miss?'

'Ettie. No, never wanted to get close on purpose. First time for everything,' I say. He doesn't look too happy with my reply. 'Hear you've been knocking down doors asking about that officer. They got him near the bakery, didn't they?' I lean back against the wall, crossing my arms. 'Curious, no? Wanna know a secret, Sergeant Shaw?'

'Who are you?' He stares at me, eyes wide. The rowdy sound of men giving and receiving orders, the rustling of papers comes from the window, fills the quiet between us. He's suspicious. Good. I hope it makes him listen. All the better if the mystery catches his attention. The Sergeant glances around, moving closer.

'Where did you get this information?'

I pass along a scrap of old newspaper folded over. There're chalk marks on my hand, smearing on the paper. 'I know who killed your fellow officer. I promise to tell you everything, but not here. Only alone. Meet me by the forest edge in the corner of town, after dark. Don't be late!' I don't wait for his response, instead hurrying down the road, stopping by the corner to see if he opens the message. I know what it reads, and the words ring in my ears: *Bring weapons and hide the girl somewhere safe. Euphemia has a plan.*

A few hours later, Fran is crouching in the opposite bush, the light of the moon illuminating the clearing we chose as the meeting spot. My breath billows into the air. There's no birdsong this evening, no wind, almost as if the forest is watching.

Shaw and Euphemia are at a standstill. Dying leaves on withered branches frame their heads, playing with the shadows enough to create the image of a pair of ghouls begging for vengeance. Jack is missing.

Shaw breaks the quiet first. 'The authorities know everything, Euphemia. There's no need to pretend any longer.' His stance is firm. One hand on his side, where a baton hangs, the other stubbornly avoiding a leather case with the small handle of a pistol sticking out. 'You won't find the child, not as long as I live.'

The set of his jaw pairs nicely with Euphemia's blank stare. In just an hour, me and Fran will be out of town, the reward to snitching on that monster. Not that it was a hard choice. Us two, or the vile empire she built founded on innocent blood.

Euphemia sniffs, looking around. Behind her, a shadow becomes solid. Jack appears, whispering in her ear. His eyes, black as tar, fall on Fran's hiding place.

'Come out, you little traitors!' Euphemia snarls. The branches surrounding her bristle. Seems her evil is enough to stain even nature.

I stand, waving to Fran to stay where she is. Of course, my attempts mean nothing to her as she gets up and joins me, sliding in front like a broken shield.

Euphemia pauses, mouth twisting into a snarl hidden within her smile, a vein pulsing in her neck. 'You believed him, girls? He is a manipulator. Plays into people's weaknesses. Just like he preyed

on mine.’ She scrunches her eyes shut, as if she’s crying but her cheeks stay dry. ‘My poor baby, living without her mother.’

‘Sergeant Shaw never stole your daughter. He saved her from you two! Did you really think you could live by using your child to deepen your pockets?’ Fran glares. ‘Rot in hell. They’ll want you there, Euphemia.’

I don’t see the attack. I only hear Fran’s shout as they drop and roll in the wet leaves. Euphemia wrestles Fran into a headlock, squeezing.

‘I’ll take care of him, Miss Ettie. Just wait a little more,’ Shaw points his baton at Jack. Daring him to move. His pistol stays wrapped in its holster. ‘Reinforcements will be here to help.’

‘And while we wait, I’m supposed to just let my sister die?’ I scream at his back. I rip at Euphemia’s hair, my teeth bared. She starts to drag Fran further into the trees by her neck. I follow behind, leaving Shaw to deal with Jack. This isn’t how it was meant to go. We should’ve already been past the forest, hiding in the country. Where did it all go so wrong?

Strength floods my body as I notice Fran’s bloating face gain a tinge of purple. Soon, it’ll look the same as the corpse of the officer she killed all those nights ago. If I don’t do something. Anything.

Without another thought, I grab the nearest branch and break it over Euphemia’s head, putting all my power into the hit. I don’t stop, can’t stop, not even when Fran is freed and crawling away. All I see in my mind is Fran in place of the dead man, empty gaze staring through me. But she’s alive. She’s still breathing. Wheezing and hacking, raw sobs echoing in the quiet.

We stand over what used to be a living being, now a shrunken figure. Blood drips down my wrist, soaking the sleeve. I lower my

arms. 'There's blood on my nose, on my mouth, in my eyelashes. It's burning into my skin like a brand.

Fran lunges, ripping the branch out of my fingers. She swings over her head, then to the ground. Euphemia's body gives a squelch, a fresh spurt of blood splattering on us both. There's so much red. It keeps seeping from the wound, bubbling out of her lips. Enough to take a bath in. How much can one corpse hold? Looks like the monster had a heart, after all.

Police whistles reach my ears, the shouts of men following close behind. The pool of red sinks into the ground, gorging on the remains.

'Let's go, Ettie.'

'What? Where?'

'Home,' She turns to me with a smile. 'I want to go home.'

From between the trees comes a screech. We spin around to see him. Jack. He survived. In his hand, he holds Shaw's pistol, aimed at me.

Fran snatches my wrist, and we stumble in our hurry to flee.

My feet thunder through the forest floor. Snapping twigs snag my ankles and rip at my skirt. We can't stop running. Looking back for even a second is certain death, a slow rotten one if Jack takes mercy. Not likely after what I've done.

A damn shame. The victory burned in my veins while it lasted, mixed with a bitter tang rising in my throat. I've never ran like this before. Like a colt, tripping and throwing out my hands as protection in the faint moonlight from above. We're gasping for air. Dragging each other further by anything in reach – a muddy sleeve, a bloodstained hand.

'Almost to the road. Just a little faster, Ettie,' Fran spins to check on me. Sweat beads on her upper lip, filling the cracked skin.

She licks it off. 'We can make it.'

A branch scores my skin. The cut gives a faint sting, adding to the pains throughout my body. My tongue is so dry I fear I might never be able to swallow or speak again.

Doubts crowd my mind. How much longer? The wind's stronger than before. The forest cover lets through beams of deep grey skies, night clouds covering the moon in the distance. It gets harder to push against the dirt.

There. A town sign appears in the thinning treeline. Laughter wheezes from me. We made it. I turn back to Fran with a smile, but she doesn't see. Instead, the whites of her eyes grow as she looks over my shoulder. Our eyes meet and a tear slips down her cheek.

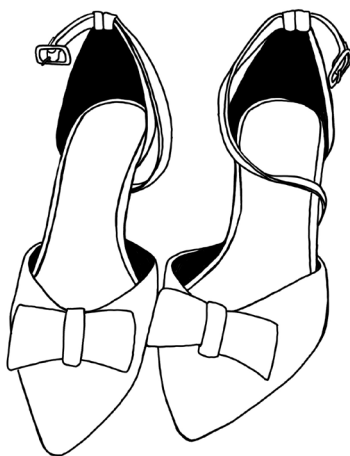
Fran pushes me out of the way. Cracks fill the forest. They're deafening.

It's last thing I hear before my world shatters.

Should I Write a Self-Help Book?

Amelia Walsh

Amelia Walsh is a writer from Northern England. She wrote her first film at the age of ten, a blatant rip-off of Disney's *Frozen*. Now, reformed from thievery, she takes pleasure in writing original plays and non-fiction. When not writing, she can be found drinking coffee while reading fashion magazines.



Introduction.

It was June '25 when I told the lad I avoid that I had a boyfriend. 'I don't believe that for a second,' he said.

Knowing full well it was a lie, I asked him why he didn't believe me. He'd assumed I'd been working on my shy, bookish self.

Now, this was the last thing I expected to hear from someone who had been desperately, hopelessly, fiendishly lusting after me for the whole time I'd known him. I'd decorated myself with imaginary boyfriends, although when the one he believed in left for the North Sea, the threat of him severely diminished. Together, we spread rumours about my lustre. We were borderline bullies. I know I don't want a fella and Vogue decided boyfriends are cringe, but how dare he suggest that I needed to work on myself?

'I think you can't find anyone worthy of your love,' he said.

I admit he pulled himself back a little there, but not enough for me to quit my fake-retching on the kitchen counter to an audience of dirty dishes. With exactly less than nobody to call my boyfriend, I asked myself: "When I write this all down in my diary, will it sound like I made it up?"

It was the Easter before this incident when I pitched the idea of a comic-self-help book to the kitchen manager. He'd asked if I was going to use my degree to write children's books, to which I huffed and went, 'God, no. I'm going to write a self-help book.'

What was I on about?

He laughed at me. I took it personally. I locked in.

'I'm the perfect candidate to write a self-help book,' I said before I could take back the reins on my vocal cords. 'Page one, only boring people get bored. Page two, never leave the house in

a bad outfit.’

‘Boring people don’t like to be told they’re boring,’ he said.

‘Ah. But, Mr Moshpit, if you never tell someone their favourite shoes are dog-ugly, they’ll hold onto them forever.’

I wrapped up a cheeseburger and raised my eyebrows at him. He winced and pushed his glasses up his nose with his index finger.

At present, nobody but me reads my diary. In fact, the last person who did received a swift knock o’er the mazzard with it and was dragged along to another showing of Spielberg’s *West Side Story*. Should I be writing down these conversations with these people? Is it vain or self-indulgent? Are there GDPR laws for diaries, and what does GDPR stand for again?

Obviously, I’ve read plenty of self-help books. One in one serving, if Alexa Chung’s *It* counts. But *Untangle Your Anxiety* left me more wound up than when I began. *Women Don’t Owe You Pretty* sits swag on my bookshelf, but I’m still a feminist-failure, tight-fisted hand at the razor. The book on curing insomnia was far too interesting to put me to sleep.

If these people can take a stab at self-help, why can’t I?

I’ve pitched my daft little book to almost anyone who will listen, with varied reception. The projectionist thought it was class, the jean-sleeper thought I was thick as a post. Since the idea’s birth at Easter, my brain has been plagued with tragic life advice. I shared it with my boss from a town which, according to the projectionist “isn’t real.”

The time has come now to share it with love, from me to you.

Only Boring People Get Bored.

Eight weeks into the six-week holiday. Sun blazed on the lukewarm Fell. We lived in my mum's friend's attic, which couldn't decide if it was a sauna or a chiller. I was nine. My Barbies had exhausted all their outfit options. My Sylvanian Families had endured more dramas than *Coronation Street*. I'd completed all three seasons of *Dance Moms* and levelled up on *Mario and Sonic at the Olympic Games*.

I was *bored*.

In one attempt to cure my boredom, I tried to solve equality in the world of *Skylanders*. And, by this, I mean I took them one by one as they died, ensuring they were all played with. This ended in tears, and not mine. When the baby napped, I choreographed a show to the tunes on her music mat and performed to an audience of two people. My costume? A Hello Kitty starter bra. My audience? Confused by the song about Virgin Media.

The baby awoke from her nap and I released my audience. I realised that a hostage situation is not the cure for boredom.

Costume change! Time for the rag side of my reversible polyester Cinderella dress. Twelve minutes of pretending to clean passed. 'I'm bored,' I whinged, elbow on the kitchen island, cheek smushed into the palm of my hand.

My mum's best friend whipped her head round like an owl with a choppy bob and opposable thumbs. 'Only boring people get bored.'

The walls stomped towards me like they were about to rip my dress apart. The baby on her hip started to cry. Flinging the kitchen door open, I knew hitting the freeway would clear my head. I shifted the trike into gear, held my mum's iPhone 4 in one hand, and

steered with the other. “Cannonball” bounced through the speakers. By my third lap of the garden, Truth waved her magic wand. *Only boring people get bored. Ding!* And, I haven’t been bored since.

Terry Pratchett credits boredom to creativity. “In a universe full of wonders, they have managed to create boredom,” he writes in his 1996 book, *Hogfather*.¹ It may come as a surprise that 1996 was midway through the nineties, a decade heavy with innovations for curing tedium. Text messaging was invented in 1992, then came along with things like the PlayStation and Tickle Me Elmo. Who knew that texting and Google, things that were likely invented to pull people together, would eventually pull the world apart?

Various charities have pinned connections to technology and misery. The hit of the pandemic saw an increase in loneliness among young people, which has been on the up and up since. The Newport Institute says that loneliness peaks between the ages of 18 to 29, worsening in the winter.² The shiny solution to this is social media, right? Social in the title, there’s the opportunity to peek into your friends’ lives. Their perfect beige outfits and perfect beige iced coffees, and you can comment and direct message and see their true, authentic, real-life lives, right?

Turns out, social media isn’t the social cure. Commenting is a fake face. There’s a constant pressure for perfection. Young adults who spend more than three hours on their devices have less time to spend on other relationships. It’s worse for teenagers too – there’s an increased chance of having depression by age fourteen if you

1. Pratchett, Terry, *Hogfather*, (London: Penguin, 1996)

2. Buecker, S., Mund, M., Chwastek, S., Sostmann, M., & Luhmann, M. (2021). Is loneliness in emerging adults increasing over time? A preregistered cross-temporal meta-analysis and systematic review. *Psychological Bulletin*, 147(8), 787–805. <https://www.newportinstitute.com/resources/mental-health/loneliness-and-depression-young-adults/>

spend three hours a day online.

I've watched people crumble at their phone camera. 'Influencers' alter their face, their shape. I've watched friends talk differently, from their top teeth, engaging their cheek muscles rather than their mouth, creating a whole new honest, online self.

I suppose my question is, who actually likes social media? I know I don't. Every time I open my phone, I feel a deep disappointment in myself. My brain cells decay. I couldn't give a hoot about beige perfection. That said, if you're having a Facebook breakup, please share it all.

Instagram stories are a cheap day out on the Waltzers. You're in a bar. You love Taylor Swift's new album. You hate Sabrina Carpenter's haircut. Now, you're solving world peace. You're back in the bar.

Hold the phone. You're posting about world peace in Flares? No world leader is watching your Instagram story. Nobody cares about your opinions on the current state of pop music. Put the phone away and get down to some cheese.

The most boring people I know have the busiest social medias.

'Boring people don't like to be told they're boring,' Mr Mosh-pit said.

But if Berger never told Miranda, 'He's just not that into you,' she never would've known.

Cricket Interlude.

'I've got some more advice for your book,' he said as I handed out straws.

'Go on.'

'Don't fall asleep on the train.'

I wanted to say ‘duh!’

‘My dad had to pick me up from Hull instead of Brough after cricket.’

I don’t want to put words in his mouth, but I think the advice here is to not watch cricket. It’ll send you to sleep.

Never Leave the House in a Bad Outfit.

Have you ever looked through old pictures with your mum and she’s slagging off her old outfit? ‘God, what was that skirt with that top?’ and ‘How much mousse did I have in my hair?’ We watch people crease and cringe with fashion regrets, but truth be told, I have none.

Fair dos. I’ll never wear the ballet flats, skinny jeans and saffron top that was longer than my pleather jacket again. But I don’t regret it. Why? Because my ten-year-old self felt fly. I’m not ashamed to admit that the only outfits I regret are the ones I didn’t feel fabulous in.

In 2019, Kim Cattral told *The Guardian* that she would never want to be in a situation where she isn’t enjoying herself.³ Six years on, the world is flirting with bleakness, where films are fighting to squeeze the most tears out of their audience. Clothes are shapeless and soulless. Personal style was taken out back and shot. Things with flair were caught and pulled away by something more serious than a butterfly net.

In February, the projectionist, the influencer and I were discussing the film we’d just left.

3. Huntman, Ruth, *Kim Cattral: ‘I Don’t Want to be in a Situation For Even an Hour Where I’m Not Enjoying Myself,’* (The Guardian, 2017)

‘My English lecturer says they don’t invest in comedy anymore. It makes no money,’ the projectionist said.

‘I mean, that was blatant emotional porn. Back in my day, Bridget Jones was a comedy!’

The influencer added tears to the conversation.

When I got home, it clicked that nothing new was funny anymore. Pinterest drools for digital cameras. Girls gush over murder, guts and gore. We all re-watch old TV which had flair and hope for the future.

Why is it so expensive to have hope in the future the past worked so hard to build?

A long-time fear of mine has been anyone from the outside ever seeing me in my work uniform, especially since the new version rolled out. It’s not a good look. So, in my own special form of vigilantism, I try my best to only wear clothes I want to wear.

I don’t believe in *overdressed*. We get to be alive one time, and you think I’m going to rock up to places ready for bed? I’m what, a quarter of the way into my life, a fifth if I’m lucky? When I want to wear nice shoes to do a food shop, I will. Supermarkets are one of the cruellest first-world activities and heeled boots in the pasta aisle make it a little less dicey.

Now, all of this is not to say go out and buy loads of clothes. Not only is that bad for the environment, it’s bad for your mental health, too. The rush of dopamine we get when opening new packages can get as addictive as gambling. Try to buy clothes you like second hand, and in the same way, donate your old clothes to charity shops, don’t bin them. Life’s too short to parade around in clothes you don’t like, and it’s not long enough to hate the clothes you used to love.

Regrets are better spent on things you did, not things you wore.

The projectionist's booth. I'm at the door and there's smoke. I don't know why there's smoke, but there's always smoke. His feet are on the table and there's music from an old film playing. It must be a Wednesday morning, which is strange, because it's midnight outside. He realises someone's there, drops his phone in his tea. He stands up, meets me in the middle. I lean in...

And I headbutt him. I think. Still undecided. However, I'm certain on the shoes I'm wearing.

See, there's no time to regret wearing a bad outfit. Especially after spending time regretting dreams that never come to fruition.

Binned Trousers?

'I have something else for your book.'

I smirk. Nod my head.

'Always check your pockets before you bin your trousers.'

'Well duh, there could be a fiver in there.'

'Yeah. Or your car keys.'

'Mr Moshpit, you know you can wear your trousers more than once, right? You don't have to bin them every time.'

'My friend was sick on me.'

My mouth is so ready to catch flies.

'I can't believe you were sick down yourself?' I laughed, like a Billy goat. He squints at me and walks away before I say something he'll have to write me in *The Book* for.

It's So Totally Wrong to Gossip.

Way back when in the '80s, linguist Deborah Jones studied women's language. Now, I can't get my paws on the article for love nor a reasonable amount of money but if I really reach, I remember

how she categorised gossip into four sub-genres: house-talk, scandal, bitching and chatting. The general consensus in my A-Level English class was that it is so totally wrong to gossip, despite how good it feels. And the aftermath of my A-Level English class was us sitting gossiping and bitching and chatting about each other in the common room.

Anyone who works in a small kitchen in a small town knows that if you don't keep it clean it's a breeding ground for scandal. The heat from the fryers sends hormones whack— and that's how fast-food workers fall in love.

I was about six hours into my first ever shift. It was somewhere near the eight o'clock mark on side two and I'd come to terms with the fact the UHC was no joke for someone five foot tall. Can't reach the top tray, can't see over, can't see under, defo can't see through. On the first side was Fred and some other lad, on about his misadventures in love.

'I mean, it's all right if she is. She's fit and her dad's rich, so I can be a stay-at-home dad. They can both call me daddy,' said Fred.

I made a frog face to the girl training me and we all carried on with the burgers.

A couple of days later, I'm in the break room with this other lad. Brunet, tall, a couple of years older, if I had to guess. He mentions how I'm really quiet. I explained that while my mouth isn't moving, my ears are. I'm jealous of a cat's ability to twist their ears. If you're quiet, there's time to collect gossip and hoard it in your tiny mind. He asks if I have gathered anything juicy yet. I checked he wasn't blond, then decided that oh boy, I have something for him.

‘So, the blond lad, I think he’s called Fred, were telling this other lad about how he thinks he’s got someone, you know, in trouble. It’s all right, though. She’s pretty and rich, and Fred’ll happily be a stay-at-home dad.’ And I laughed for far too long before I realised I was laughing alone.

My giggle faded into the buzz of *Police Interceptors*. The boy’s hat was on the table and his hands stretched over his face. It was here I realised that the horrific lighting in the windowless room had hidden the fact that this is the most ‘blond lad my age’ I had ever seen.

‘That wasn’t Fred.’

Don’t say what I think you’re about to say.

‘That was me.’

He said what I thought he was going to say.

‘This is why I have no friends.’

‘I’ll be your friend.’

‘Really? After that?’

‘Yes.’

And I’ve held his friendship like it’s ransom ever since. How can it be totally wrong to gossip, when it’s the foundation of one of my favourite friendships? People say I talk about Goldilocks here like he’s a celebrity. Is that not the correct amount of adoration we should have for our friends?

To me, gossip isn’t all about knowing everyone’s business. I don’t care that Steve cheated on Lydia for the juice, I want to know so I have a solid reason to tell Lydia to bin him. Gossip is as close a girl can get to a bee’s pheromone dance, a flashlight in dark places. Avoid him, he’s got a thing for engaged blondes. She’s sound her,

let me borrow her lipstick in Vintage.

A study from Stanford suggests that gossip has plenty of social benefits.⁴ The average person spends an hour a day speaking about other people, deciphering where their reputations lie and what's honest about them. In their research, they discovered that hearing gossip influences people to behave better. They're slagging her off for doing that, so I best not catch myself doing it before they say I'm that way too.

There's incentive for gossiping, groups are pulled together and there's an individual reward. Gossip's the cat eyes on a country lane. It will guide you if used the right way.

We made up lies which turned out to be true. Gossip is the ancient book of people helping people, without the paper trail that burns the speaking mouth.

Alexa Chung gave us a detailed plan to surviving heartbreak, which I believed would shield me. Turns out, I only knew how to deal with that once it snuck up and clobbered me over the head. If *the* It girl's life advice can't save us, what hope does mine have? To be honest, I wrote this book, essay, whatever, for a laugh because I

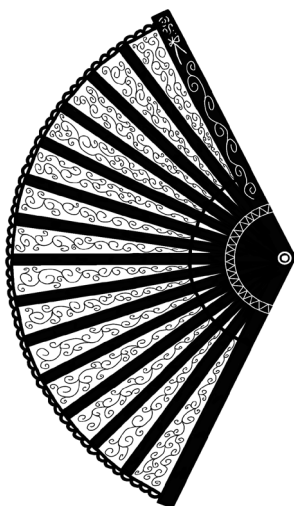
make bad decisions on the daily. No way can I tell people how to live their lives. The mosaic of mistakes I've made won't set in as life lessons until you live your life too.

4. X. Pan, V. Hsiao, D.S. Nau, & M.J. Gelfand, Explaining the evolution of gossip, Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. U.S.A. 121 (9) e2214160121, <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2214160121> (2024). <https://cmns.umd.edu/news-events/news/cant-stand-gossip-new-research-suggests-gabbing-about-others-not-always-bad-thing>

Under Guilded Lights

Emily Bywaters

Emily Bywaters is an English writer, with a focus on fantasy. She is currently studying Creative Writing at the University of Lincoln. When she is not writing, she can be found reading or doing one of her many other hobbies.



The green silks and satins of my dress brush against my legs and arms gently, as the carriage sways with movement. Normally, such fabrics and feelings would grate on my nerves but tonight... it feels different. Not off, per say. But different. Like something about my monotonous life was going to change, to shift and become... I do not know what. New – no, that feels wrong to say. Modified, transformed... Yes, those sound better.

The squeaking of the wheels and the slowing of the carriage alerts me that I have arrived at my destination. Evercrest Manor looms to my left – tall and imposing, dark but full of life and eerie yet magical. I am helped from the carriage by a footman, and he escorts me to the door. I can tell from the way he looks at me that he both despises and wants me. I know I will be receiving a lot of looks along those lines, tonight. Thankfully, he does not have long to gawk as we arrive at the door leading into the Manor.

As I enter, the doorman takes my white fur coat to hang up with the other patrons' coats. I feel his eyes scan my thin, green-dressed frame; I raise my head and stand tall. He instantly looks away – like he is afraid of me whilst also judging me, in a way. Hiding my smirk, I allow the house butler to announce my arrival and I enter the ballroom. It is covered in many shades of green, from curtains and table covers to dresses and bow ties. All of which are highlighted by glistening silver cutlery and shining golden jewelry. I make my way through the throng of people, who nod at me with respect, envy and awe. I keep my head high as I am greeted with the occasional 'stare that could kill'. I never speak a word to them; I do not have to. With a well-placed smile, a wave of my hand and a subtle raise of an eyebrow or lip, I have long since mastered the art of having and ruling conversations in high society.

There are a lot of rumours stating I was either born or made

a mute, but I never deny or accept any of them. It is always best to keep society on their toes and to second guess everything. They also do not need to know everything about my life, and this is my way of having some control of the situation and narrative.

I pointedly ignored the rumours and gossip, along with the stares of envy and pity. I have long since been used to them treating me like I am an alien – like I need to be dissected and experimented on to see why I am so different, to see what is wrong with me. I know that men want me and women want to *be* me. Many women in particular have tried to emulate my quiet grace in the past but have long since given up.

I join the throng of people at the main staircase as we are finally joined by the host of the ball. Lord Evercrest — tall, broad and muscular, but not too much. He is in a dark green suit that hugs his body perfectly in all the ways that he knows will catch a woman's eye. Perfect in all the ways people believe me to be. If only they knew what it takes to be me — the ostracising and loneliness I feel.

It is my first ball seeing him in person and he is hosting — a blessing in disguise really. After all, how can I have a meeting with the man, if I do not get the opportunity to do so? I am the highest ranked woman here, which means, as the host and highest ranked man, Lord Evercrest will be expected to escort and have the first dance with me. He approaches me on cue and leads me to the dance floor. The moment we are in place, the orchestra starts the music and we dance together.

'You are a vision, milady.' The deep timbers of his voice from so close are quite a shock, but damned if they do not suit him. I smile and nod gracefully, gesturing to him with a knowing look. He clearly has some confidence and knows of the rumours surround-

ing my lack of voice because he gives me a wicked smile in return.

‘So, the rumours are true. I dread to know how long it has taken you to communicate your thoughts like this.’

I held in my sigh; it was a question I have been asked way too many times and yet people clearly never get bored of asking it. I simply raise my eyebrow and he laughs.

‘I see, milady. Point well-made.’

We continue to dance as if we did not just have a talk hidden from the patrons surrounding and watching us. I am glad to see the dances and social norms are the same so far in the north and away from the capital in which I live.

‘How do you fare, milady? Was your travel here quite perilous?’

I snort out a light-hearted laugh and nod. He frowns and I could practically feel his mind trying to figure out what I had meant. I am both surprised and very happy with how much we seem to be getting along. He is a breath of fresh air when compared to the others. Seeing that no one is close by, I decide to do something I have never done before.

‘The carriage.’

My voice was always a lilting, beautiful thing and worked perfectly. His eyes snap to mine in shock and amazement.

‘I see. It also seems some of those rumours were wrong, milady. Your voice is quite exquisite.’

I smile. I only let my servants and family hear my voice. No one else in high society, not even my closest friends, have ever heard it. I raise my head high as pride fills within me. He snorts at that.

‘If I did not know better, milady. I would say that you have never been truly complimented by anyone.’

I grimace; he was right in a way. I have never been given a compliment that was true and clearly meant something.

‘I have had some from those that have heard me. Everyone else’s feel shallow and half-hearted.’

He nods, understanding in his eyes as he pulls me closer. The orchestra was clearly dragging out the music, but I did not mind. I trusted Evercrest as well as I did myself.

‘Milady, this is where we must part. Do find me later. I would be honoured to talk with you more.’

With that, the music slows to a stop, and he kisses my hand as a parting gift before disappearing into the crowd. I grab a flute of wine from a waiter and sit at the table I have been assigned to, wanting to rest for a bit before another tries to whisk me into a dance. Women gather around me while chattering excitedly about weddings and children, leaving me quite overwhelmed and stunned.

While they chatter away and I lose myself in my thoughts, I notice how the men avoid looking directly at me – as if afraid of repercussions or something more. I feel as if I have missed something important and I cannot put my finger on it. I politely excuse myself from the ladies and make my way to a free balcony to get some air, all whilst thinking back on what could have possibly happened for everyone to react in such a way.

Nothing stood out, there was nothing I could think of that was different or should cause such a reaction. I sigh and drink my wine.

‘What is wrong, milady? You look down. Did something happen?’

I jump slightly before relaxing, realising it was Evercrest.

‘Something is wrong. Everyone is off and treating me differently. Men are not looking at me, and the women have been talking

about weddings and children. I do not even know what has happened to allow this behaviour.'

I sigh, again, and finish off my wine with a few sips. He looks at me for the longest time and then, in the most gentle and hesitant voice I have ever heard, asks me one question that throws me through a loop.

'How do... engagements... work in the capital?'

I blink and quickly think on the easiest answer I can give before I finally settle on one.

'Well, the man would traditionally ask the father of the woman he wished to marry for her hand in marriage. But that is not a necessary step. He could merely ask her to marry him as he gets to one knee with a ring for her finger. This finger,' I say, pointing with my right index finger to my left ring finger.

He stares blankly at me before, quite bluntly, saying, 'It is very different here. All it takes is a dance and a well-placed kiss on the hand for an engagement to be formed.'

I feel my throat close up in realisation – he had kissed my hand after our dance together.

'Why?' My voice is a whisper that was almost lost to the light wind blowing around us.

He smiles, and it was one of those '*I am a love-struck fool*' ones. Something I never imagined being on the receiving end of.

'I have been keeping an eye on you at each ball you have attended. Not in a creepy way, do not worry!' He hurries out the last part with wide eyes before continuing. 'Your grace and your ability to rule society without uttering a word. The way you can easily ruin someone's life without lifting a finger. Your beauty, not even just your looks, but what is on the inside. Everything... You are everything.'

I gasp and cover my mouth with both hands in shock

and amazement as he gets down on one knee.

‘I love you, Amilee. I know you do not know me well, but I promise on my life I will tell you all my secrets and share my life with you. Will you do me the honour of becoming my bride? Will you marry me?’

With that he pulls out a box and opens it to show the diamond riddled golden ring within. Tears gently fall down my face, and I feel myself nodding, despite myself being somewhat nervous.

‘Yes... I will marry you.’

And, before I realise it, I throw myself at him and kiss him with all my strength. Thankfully, he catches me and kisses me back, before sliding the ring on my finger. I let out a watery laugh as we hold each other and cuddle right there on the floor. I let him brush the tears from my face.

‘You already knew how it worked in the capital.’

He grins and nods eagerly.

‘It was worth pretending I did not, just to see your face and what you would say to me.’

I whack his chest in indignation. He chuckles and holds me tighter, bringing me closer to him.

‘You! –’ I start before he cuts me off gently to hold my hands.

‘Calm, my love. It is too early for you to already be angry with me. We have our entire lives together for that.’

I mockingly glare at him, and he merely chuckles at me before kissing me gently.

After he pulls away, he holds my face between his hands and lets our eyes meet.

‘We have forever now, we have each other.’

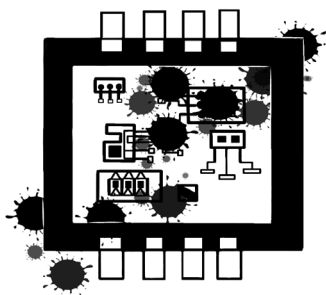
I cannot help but agree with him, and, as we cuddle and soak up each other’s presence, we know we will always have each other, no matter what may come our way.

Corrupt Conscience

Amy Clark

Amy Clark is a Peterborough based writer studying in Lincoln. Despite lifelong mental health struggles, she strives to create works she can be proud of. Her work has been published by *Young Writers* in 2018. When not writing, she unwinds with her favourite movies, or by spending time with family.

Content warnings: Mentions of death, cannibalism, swearing, forced medical work.



I - Roan

My town never did look the same again. Every time they rebuilt it, it would only get destroyed. I don't know why they bothered anymore, people died doing this just for their deaths to be in vain. I was not one of the perished, I didn't know if that was a blessing or a curse anymore. Escape wasn't possible, they had watchmen at every bridge, every fence line, every entrance in and every exit out. I say watchmen, but they were whoever they could get their hands on as long as they weren't senile. Men, women, teens, it didn't matter. Once you were dragged away, you knew what you were in for.

The youngest I knew was fifteen, a boy called Henry. He was skinny even before the hunger spell. Ashy brown hair, brown-eyed, tall, a scruffy pre-pubescent beard. Not the violent type, certainly not the type who'd turn on his own. He had been a friend of mine, before an escape attempt left him lying in a pool of red with a hole through his skull. He didn't get a funeral. They simply threw his body into the pit, burned it with all the other corpses they had collected in the prior weeks. If you got the chance to sneak into that watchtower, you could still see the stain from that afternoon, as clear as crystal even against the murky brown floors from past events.

Seeing the blood stains always led me to wonder. I don't know what led us down this path, why we were at war, why we were segregated from the other villages. They were friendly with us before, but now they barely mentioned we existed unless it was to drag the name of our town into the dust. It was a nice town before it all, children could freely run around and play, their mothers hardly keeping an eye on them as they sat drinking iced tea with their friends on long summer days. Colour could be seen throughout

town, every house unique from each other. My family's home was a vibrant violet, with a swinging chair on the porch us kids always played on, even when mother told us no. We had a vegetable patch in the garden, growing tomatoes, carrots, potatoes and herbs of all varieties. The porch was added by my great-grandfather almost 50 years ago, the vegetable patch by my mother 10 years before I was born. I wanted to add a mural at the side of the house. A homage to every generation of our family. It didn't last long enough for me to pursue that dream.

You could see where each generation that lived there had added to the wonder of the house, whether in decoration or architecture. My old friend's house used to be covered in art from our village, old and young artists displayed with pride.

'Let's go down to the market today, Emily. I'm sure plenty of new families will be there, and where there's new people, there's new art. Besides, we need to buy meat anyway, so that gives us an excuse to go.' Emily's mum would use that phrase almost every time, like she ever needed an excuse to go to the weekly village market.

It held a history, a unity we'd never felt anywhere else. We were a tight-knit community – I remember being tutored by a young girl who was from the capital, from the moment I was learning to walk and talk. She was welcomed with open arms, trusted to look after us, to teach us about our history, our culture. She taught me fancy sounding words. She taught me to read, to write, to know I could achieve anything. Oh, how wrong she was.

The last time I saw her, she said goodbye and I could see the pain in her eyes, like she knew what was going to happen to us. My village, my friends, my family. I should miss her, but I can't help but be bitter. The colours were faded now, either masked by

layers of ash, rust and blood or levelled into nothing but dust and shrapnel. It wasn't the home many of us grew up in, but for some, it had been their whole existence. Children were born here still, and despite our evident lack of medical care, many survived, slowly replacing all our losses. I don't think we'd ever recoup them all. They weren't taught to read, or to write. They learnt to be fearful, distrustful. To fend for themselves and no one else. Our generation was one of unavoidable stupidity and illiteracy. I hated how far my people had fallen.

Over a third of our people had died since this all started: 14,206 by the attacks of The Cured, another 4332 by sickness and 3189 by malnourishment. Another 2000 or so can only be assumed dead, they were forced out kicking and screaming by the oppressors. We didn't see them again. The other 900 odd were killed by their own people. Insanity set in quickly around here. People didn't know who to trust. They went mad with paranoia and fear. The murders happened soon after, knowing what our people were capable of left us all not knowing what to do. It was unnerving, terrifying, especially for me as a young woman living alone in a run-down shell of my family home.

I walked the same route from that house every day. I cannot say without fail, as sometimes toppled houses stood in the way and I had to revert to what little street sense I had left, it usually came back to me well enough, however

I passed by corpses on this walk more frequently than most should. Some had bites taken out of them or had limbs completely missing. We were low on resources after all. Many more were skeletons piled against the fence, smeared in blood as if something had been dragged off them, more than likely human. There were few animals that hung around here anymore.

The watchmen averted their gaze when my eyes met theirs. I'd say they were hiding their shame, but it was clear most of them had none. They lost their humanity a long time ago. I was one of them once, they took me out of the role soon after I started though, 'too violent' they told me, like too much violence was a thing. I don't even remember being overly aggressive. Then again, my memory had been blurry for a while, all the days merged. I suppose they just weren't desperate enough to keep me on; despite the fact they were all killers anyway. It hurt in a way, knowing I wasn't worthy to protect the one place I called home. To protect the people that made our town home when it was all but gone.

I kept walking, labelling the blood spills by name as I saw them. James, died 32 days ago, shot dead on sight, culprit - watchmen. Anabelle, died 57 days ago, trampled and died hours later. Lexi, died 1 day ago, shot dead on sight, culprit - watchmen. I liked her. Now, I just hoped no one would repeat my journey each day in the future, relaying names of the fallen, and uttering mine. Roan, died 10 days ago, shot dead on sight. I instead hoped they would see blood up the barbed wire fence, or a hole cut through it with makeshift cutters, and utter Roan, escaped, no updates. For my sake, I hoped I'd make it out of there one day. I couldn't imagine being stuck there any longer. I couldn't live that life when people were suffering, people I cared about. I didn't know what the capitals were doing but I knew I needed to know.

I had papers littered around my room, brown and weathered, mainly reused by me over and over. All resources were hard to come by and, understandably, we focused on food, water, and warmth. We were still starving though. I wrote out maps of the city, routines and schedules of the watchmen, the townsfolk. Most of them had the same plans every day, it wasn't hard to memorise. I had many escape

plans, all of them ended with death in my mind. I had to find a way out. There was no room for error.

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Log 1:

The neural link has worked. I did not actually believe it would, I thought my higher-ups were all a bunch of imaginative fools. Alas, I am proven wrong.

I have not learned much yet, she is still waking from her sedatives, but I'm receiving brainwaves. I will update this log as I find out more, or anything at that.

'Scientist' C

Date - 12th June 3001

Log 5:

Day five with this girl, and she is already driving me mad with boredom. She spends all day helping her town, collecting food and water, like primitive creatures. It makes me laugh really, seeing them this way. Our city is thriving, food aplenty, clean water running through every building. They're in rubble and squalor. Fighting amongst themselves.

She hasn't figured out what we did to her, but I'm already in her head. She's trying to escape, has all the plans. I've sent requests for more watchmen and a sporadic routine to counteract that, without her knowing of course. Can't have her figuring out our little game. Can't have her coming here, figuring out what we're doing, what we did to her.

'Scientist' C

Date - 17th June 3001

Log 37:

She's agitated now. All of my changes have gotten in her way. She's acting out in anger, anger that isn't even hers. She's snapping, threatening her people, her friends... and she doesn't even realise it's my influence on her. Quite honestly, I don't know why I was chosen for this task, to get inside her head, but it is fun none the less. The company saw some worth in this girl, I suppose. I'll just have to wait and see. I just hope it's over sooner rather than later. I don't have the strongest self conscience, but having hers as well, it's beginning to really piss me off.

'Scientist' C

Date - 18th July 3001

II - Charlotte

Walking around this city is still a daze, the sun blared off every window, glowing neon signs on every wall. Blinding. I hated it, but I'll blame my parents for giving me melanin-thin corneas. Stupid father with his blonde hair, blue eyes and weak, recessive genes. At least I got my mother's brown hair. It's the one thing she did right for me. It certainly helps me blend in better, and I always did look better in sunglasses.

The streets were quieter now though; exterminations and banishment are finally making an effect. I liked that, I liked that a lot, actually. People either walked in suits and ties or body armour and vests; those were the only real attires that meant anything here.

I wore both, couldn't have anyone taking me out on my walk to work now, could I?

I arrived at the same time every day, 7am, to avoid my colleagues. I didn't have patience for them, especially now with the words of some townie in my head. I would say I don't know why I agreed to have this bloody chip in my head, but it was the money. I didn't need it, I wanted it, pure and simple. Cash is king, cash is a way through, cash is how you move up in the ranks. I won't fall behind, even if I throw down others doing it.

As I sat at my desk, skimming through reports of recent lab work, I note down her thoughts, her feelings. Anything I could report back to the company as useful. Today she's collecting water. I can hear her speaking to what I just assume is a friend. God knows anymore, but I can hear her anyway.

'Hey Marie, grab that quart there. Yeah, that one. Awesome. If you carry that one, I've got the other two. Won't last long but it'll be enough until someone else comes down. Just have to ration it. Alright, I'll see you back in town.'

I laughed in my head. Never aloud, not once. Those poor pathetic people. I finally managed to leave my desk, even if I wanted to sit and play with Roan's brain a bit more. She grew tiring after a while. I was performing a simple centrifugation, the process of spinning blood at high speeds to separate the base components by density, testing blood from our citizens. Taking without consent, of course, no one here will ever admit they're sick.

I picked up a tube from the centrifuge, holding it carefully in my palms as I inspected it. A sharp pain pierced my skull. A flash. Dust floors. Flash. Barbed wire. Flash. Footsteps drowned out by gunshots. The test tube had dropped, smashed on the floor. The company would not be happy about that. My eyes were wide, my

fists gripped the countertop, my breathing was deep and fearful, but the flashing had stopped. Thank God the flashing had stopped. The smash attracted others. They saw me being weak and it was all that girl's fault. I felt a gloved hand on my shoulder. Even through my shirt, I could feel the powdery latex.

‘Charlotte! Fucking Christ, are you ok? This isn’t like you.’

Even despite my breathlessness, I spoke proudly. No showing weakness, I told myself, not for a second.

‘Send out a spy team. The girl’s escaped. Do not let her get to the capital and send someone to look at this god damn chip. Shit.’

They didn’t hesitate, boots pounding out of the door. One colleague stayed behind. Of course he did, always the carer.

‘You can go too, jackass. I don’t need your help.’ He stayed. I snapped. ‘Get the fuck out of here before I gouge out your eyes!’

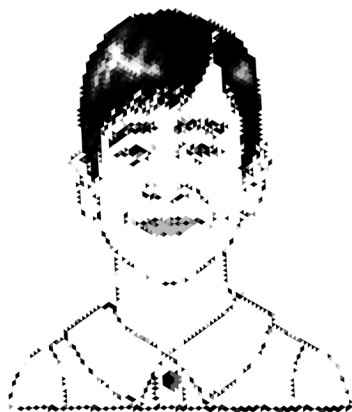
He finally fled and I was left alone to recover. This wasn’t supposed to happen like this. Her fear, her panic, her pain, it was all too real for me. She made me weak. This couldn’t stand.

I looked down at my hands. My gaze was sharp enough you would think I was trying to intimidate my own body. I certainly couldn’t trust my mind anymore; God knows if I could trust the rest. I grabbed a pistol from the table, a Glock 17 Gen 4. Still under lock and key, even in a world of killers. But this time a guard left it behind when he heard the commotion. I clicked the slide back, loading in a new round. The tip of the muzzle was hot, recently fired. There had been a riot outside, must’ve still been executing the worst of the troublemakers. I would’ve just followed them, I still could, but I didn’t need to dignify those people with my presence. They wouldn’t have let me leave the Capital either, but I knew a backway out. She needed to be found – captured or killed.

False Family

Oliver Undy

Oliver Undy is an English writer studying Creative Writing at the University of Lincoln. Specialising in Sci-FI and fantasy, he writes predominantly for screen but also enjoys writing prose as well. Outside of writing, he can be found listening to music, playing video games and watching sports.



His eyes opened and white light invaded his irises, causing his lids to flutter and squint. He could see a blurry figure in front of him; balding, mid 40s and dressed in a fine doctor's uniform.

'Everything feeling alright, Edward?' said the Doctor. Edward sat up on the hospital bed beneath him, which was a far cry from the plush velvet he was used to, and reached at the bedside table looking for something to drink. He fondled a small cup and brought it to his lips. Cool water reinvigorated him, yet he was somewhat disappointed that it wasn't alcohol to numb the ceaseless throbbing in his temple.

'My head,' said Edward, which he struggled to get out as he caressed his head. He was surprised for a moment to find his hair shaved, but the stitches reminded him of what had been done.

'Right, of course. But if there is nothing else then I can send them in.' The thought of seeing them made his pulsating headache an afterthought and he mustered his strength to nod to the doctor. The doctor took a device from his coat pocket and started entering code onto it. Before long, he stopped and looked back up at Edward.

'All set. Meet Jolie and Sebastian.' said the doctor. As he spoke they walked into the room. Jolie looked at him with a soft smile, and any regrets Edward may have had were gone. She was tall, elegant and wore a floral sundress which he found a little peculiar for winter, but he paid little mind to that due to the ethereal beauty in front of him. In her eyes he saw nothing but affection. Then he saw little Sebastian and his heart melted, the little boy was a perfect combination of Edward and Jolie's features; a perfect son. Sebastian looked at him as if he were his hero. Edward opened his arms and waited for a hug, teary-eyed. They cascaded into him.

'Perfect,' he whispered.

‘We’ve been waiting for you,’ Jolie said with a smooth soft cadence as she picked up Sebastian and placed him on the bed so he could hug Edward.

‘I’ve been waiting longer for you two,’ said Edward, which earned a chuckle from Jolie. The doctor cleared his throat and drew Edward’s attention.

‘I assume everything is in order?’ the doctor said.

‘Very much so,’ replied Edward.

‘Great, well if it’s just a headache you have we can discharge you immediately. And you can enjoy some time with your... family.’ Edward knew why but didn’t care, he had Jolie and Sebastian now and nothing else mattered.

Edward fumbled for his keys in his pocket; the drugs had limited his motor functions. His family stood behind him, with large grins on their faces yet they said nothing. He found his keys and unlocked the door. Inside was a large flat with vast empty spaces inside. It had a very high roof and a chandelier hung from the ceiling. He switched the lights on and the room was illuminated. The style was minimalist, black and white were the colours that dominated the furniture and walls. The kitchen was large and sported all the highest tech gadgets and machines. The dining table sat near the windows which overlooked the heart of London. He could see skyscrapers advancing endlessly across the city. Sebastian skipped inside, admiring it all for the first time, never dropping his strong grin. Jolie followed and placed her small hands on Edward’s shoulders and hugged him from behind.

‘Now it’s a home. Isn’t it Edward?’ she whispered into his ear. He turned to her, and his heart fluttered as he felt emotions he had never felt before.

‘Our home,’ he affirmed while gazing out into the beautiful night. He slipped from her grasp and went to the mirror. His head was still bandaged. He unwrapped himself and unveiled his full face. Wrinkles and slightly greying hair made him look much older than his thirty years. He guessed isolation and loneliness were the cause. Yet his new family would be the remedy. Jolie wandered off toward the kitchen and began to cook dinner, while Sebastian meandered around the flat discovering everything for the first time. Edward poured himself a glass of wine, from the bottle he’d had on the side saved for special occasions or guests. The taste was sour yet it softened the aching in his head.

Sat at the dinner table, Edward tried to imagine what the meal would have smelled like. His wife had made them all a beautiful roast dinner which sat before each of them on vintage silver plates he’d received as a gift once from one of his only workmates. Knife and fork in hand, he attacked the meal and shovelled it into his mouth. Sebastian gave a groan of satisfaction as he ate and his wife smiled at the boy with maternal affection. Then she smiled back at Edward.

‘Will you take him to school tomorrow, while I work?’ he asked, mouth empty yet he chewed as if it were full.

‘Of course dear. His first day! You’ll enjoy it won’t you?’ She placed her knife and fork down and pinched Sebastian’s cheeks, he giggled and swatted her hand away. As he watched, Edward began to get the feeling that if anything got in the way of his new happy family, he might take drastic action. Anything to avoid returning to the nights of sleeping in an empty bed and waking to a silent household, this was perfection. He supposed he’d had the technology of 2042 to thank, or the people who developed it. A world without this new technology was not a world he could ever

envision, how people functioned in the past, he had no clue.

Dinner was finished. Jolie took all the plates and began to wash them. Edward's stomach growled, so he grabbed a ready meal and threw it into his high-tech microwave. It automatically detected the ideal time and temperature and began to heat it up. His wife finished washing up and took their son to bed, leaving him alone at the microwave as they disappeared through a closed door. Loneliness gnawed at him once again. They were just behind the door, but he couldn't shake the feeling that they might just disappear, and he'd never see them again. The microwave dinged, he took the meal out and began to eat it as quickly as he could. He washed the food down with water as it got stuck in his throat from the gluttony, then he rushed into the guest room that his son would claim.

Relief surged in him when he saw them again. Jolie sat on the bed and read Sebastian a story. Edward leaned in the doorway and watched. He supposed he'd have to buy some new wallpapers and such to make the room feel like a little boy's room. Her voice was smooth and calming, and he felt his eyelids drooping as she spoke much like his son who had just passed out. Without speaking, she rose from the bed and gestured at Edward for them to go to their bedroom. He took her hand and retreated from their son's room. Their room was bare, practical. He had no decorations, and the rooms, like the main area, were painted in black and white. He undressed and joined her on the bed. She hugged his back and while he could not feel her physical warmth, the effect she had on his soul was poignant and filling.

Sunlight filtered through the windows onto his face, when he rolled over his wife was not there. He'd figured she had taken their

son to school after looking at the time. And he needed to get ready for work. Suits and ties littered most of his wardrobe; he had a high-paying job working for the Government. He was largely unimportant but that was how he liked it. That way he could return home with no stress and be with his family.

His workday was mundane, he mentioned to his colleague that he'd undergone the procedure and was met with praise. Most of his coworkers had done the same thing, the age of loneliness people had called their era. Not anymore. Edward thought the age of bliss was more fitting. *How could anyone be unhappy when they can create whatever they want?*, he thought, as he idly typed on his holographic keyboard. By now the movements were natural, he could just zone out and do his job efficiently, like a mindless machine. Between tasks all he could think of was them. How perfect they were. The procedure had set him back a few hundred thousand pounds, yet he couldn't feel any guilt for the purchase. Only how glad he was that he had finally saved up the money after all those years.

The shift came to an end and he found himself outside his flat, grinning as he opened the door, ready to greet his family. But when he entered he heard nothing. They should've ran to him the second he entered and his son should be home from school by now. He scanned the main room for them, yet saw nothing. He crept to his son's room and opened the door. Sebastian sat still, facing the window. Edward felt immense relief that they were still here, but his son wasn't moving. He inched forward and got a look at the boy's face. Tears streaked down his cheeks and his soul looked absent through a blank stare. Edward shook Sebastian's shoulders.

'Sebastian? Why are you crying?' There was no response. Jolie would know something. He exited and entered their shared room.

She was in the same state. Crying, devoid of life. She sat on their bed and stared out the window, he broke her vision yet still she did not move her eyes or respond. Edward found himself hyperventilating, the shirt was constricting his throat so he ripped the upper buttons off and loosened his tie. He keeled over and tried to take deep breaths yet only small broken ones came out. Tears began to stream like rivers and bile rose in his throat. He ran to the toilet and vomited, viscous fluid sat bobbing in the toilet. He flushed them down and wiped his tears yet could not stop panicking. The only thing to do was find a solution.

The hospital doors swung open as Edward barged through them, eyes wide, frantic as they scanned the hallways and employees. They looked at him with worried and scared expressions yet he did not care. Chatting with another patient, he found the doctor and yanked him by his collar toward a more private location.

‘It’s malfunctioning! My family is compromised! You will fix it.’ The doctor looked terrified as Edward screamed in his face.

‘What’s wrong with them? You said everything is in order?’

‘They’re fucking catatonic! Won’t move. Won’t respond. Fix them or I’ll find where you live and make your family know suffering.’

‘It’s not that simple. Another procedure will likely kill you. We don’t have enough of a sample size! Go home and maybe they will be better?’ The doctor pleaded. Edward looked into his eyes for a few moments, making sure his threats had taken root, and then dropped the doctor and walked away. The doctor wiped his brow as the man left.

The first thing he did as he returned home was look up the Doctor’s address online. The holographic keyboard made no sound

as he smashed the inputs into the search bar. Directory, then details and with ease he noted the address down in his brain. As he finished, Sebastian appeared in the dark hallway behind him, face obscured.

‘Son?’ Was he fixed? He asked himself. Perhaps he didn’t need to go through with his threats after all, but no response was given. When he looked closer, he saw that the boy’s head was snapped to the left at an unnatural angle, like his neck had been broken. The boy stepped into the light. His eyes, once brown, glowed crimson. His limbs seemed to have their joints all dislocated. Edward gasped. Jolie appeared to his right, in the same broken state.

‘Fix us my love. Fix us now.’ She got right up to his face, with a manic expression. ‘Fix us or we will kill you!’ Her voice was amplified and the noise hurt his ears. What once was his perfect wife and son were now twisted and broken. He’d have to visit that doctor. In his desk he unveiled a small revolver wrapped in cloth, the cylinders filled with bullets, when he heard a firm knock at the door.

‘Police! Open up.’ Pocketing the gun, Edward walked to the door and opened it. One officer stood in uniform.

‘Hello. What are you here for?’ He tried to sound innocent as he spoke.

‘We received a complaint about you. Threatening and violent behaviour.’

‘Really?’ Edward mulled over what to do. He needed to see the doctor and these two wouldn’t leave. Drastic action was necessary. The pistol felt heavy in his grasp, he took it out of his pocket and in a flash cracked the officer in the nose, then swung again and again until the man fell unconscious. Time was bought. The halls shook as he sprinted away, one destination in mind.

A large and expensive-looking house stood before him. Beautiful hedges surrounded it, maintained impeccably. The house had a vintage aesthetic that made it look like it was plucked out of time. He crouched and went to the back of the house and tried the back door, locked. The front door wasn't even worth trying. A large rock would do the job, he found one lying nearby, as if it was inviting someone to use it. He wound back his arm and launched the rock through a window with all his might. It shattered it into thousands of pieces and made a loud noise that would have woken up the inhabitants so he had to be quick. Glass cut at him as he climbed through, the little shards drew blood from his hands and thighs yet he didn't care. The inside of the house matched its outward aesthetic and, like his own place, sported all the highest tech gadgets and appliances. Gun raised, he moved through the darkness toward a light source he saw in the hallway. He found the doctor, hands raised, standing in front of his family, real flesh and blood. A woman and a young girl cowered behind him, fear etched in their expressions.

'Edward. You need help.' The doctor's voice broke as he trembled, he was doing a very poor job at hiding his fear.

'You're right. And you will be the one to help me. Or we will see if your family are bulletproof or not.' They squirmed as he made his intentions known and squealed.

'Okay Edward. I will come with you. Just don't hurt them.' The doctor inched forward, Edward stepped back, gun still trained on them. He gestured to the front door. The doctor moved forward and opened the door to the outside. Edward followed behind, gun pointed at his back. They travelled to the car. Edward stepped into the passenger seat as the doctor assumed the driver's side. The doctor imputed the hospital onto his auto-pilot and the vehicle started to travel to their destination.

As they arrived, Edward concealed the gun.

‘Play along,’ Edward threatened. The doctor still shivered and Edward knew he would listen. They entered the hospital together. The doctor greeted his coworkers as they walked, trying to portray just a normal emergency shift. But Edward saw the worried looks on their faces as they passed. They continued onwards to the operating room. The thought of repairing his family was the only thing that drove Edward, the only thing that mattered and as they entered the room he knew things were going to be ok. He laid down on an operating table and closed his eyes. The doctor provided anaesthetic. When he woke, his family would be whole again. As he faded into unconsciousness, he saw Jolie and Sebastian in his mind. Driving him forward.

Familiar white strobe lights filled his irises as he woke. Yet when he tried to move his fingers, nothing happened. He tried to move his toes, they wouldn’t budge. He had only control of his eyes. Yet what he saw warmed his heart. Jolie and Sebastian by his side, forever. The doctor came into view and sat Edward up, he seemed more at ease.

‘I warned you this was dangerous. You have lost all motor function. The police will arrive soon. And you will be dealt with accordingly.’ The words didn’t affect Edward. He didn’t need a strong or functional body. He just needed his family, and they were here. Jolie caressed his scalp and kissed his forehead.

‘Good job, my love. Together again.’ She whispered in his ear. A ghost of a smile was on his lips, a permanent expression. A wheelchair was given to him, he was placed on it and wheeled out toward a few police officers. *They couldn’t send a disabled man to jail*, he thought as they took him away. Even if they did, it didn’t matter.

But when he saw Sebastian again, his heart sank and his stomach churned. Bright red eyes, twisted joints.

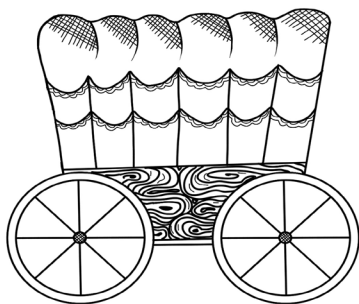
‘I hate you, Father.’ The boy said. Locked in this body, Edward realised he was going to be living in a nightmare for the rest of his life.

A Heaven West of Where We Were

Elise Vine

Elise Vine is a writer based in Lincoln. She takes particular inspiration from the past, whether it be 17th century France or the metal and emo subcultures of the 2000s. When not writing, she can be found painting flash, playing guitar and pestering cats.

Content warnings: Vomiting, death, illness, prejudice against indigenous people.



The moment the words ‘Cordelia-Lee Astor’ leave Mama’s lips, I know I’m in trouble. Regardless of her tone and *that* look, the mere appearance of my full name could mean nothing else. Either the heat of the rising sun or whatever I did paints her cheeks in a beet-red smear – an all-too-common occurrence off the back of which I am forced to swallow a giggle or face the consequences. If I respond I’ll be wrong and if I don’t I’ll also be wrong. I jut out my bottom lip and widen my eyes to glistening pools, at which she shakes away a laugh. Mama’s never mad at me for long, especially here. She can’t afford to be.

‘Never mind, Cordelia. Can you help your sister with the cooking? I can’t bear to watch her try to skin that rabbit any longer.’

I hike my skirt out the way of my ankles and throw myself on the ground beside Charity, who is hacking away at the carcass like she’s whittling a spoon with a paper knife. I recognize the implication of her melodramatic sigh but watch on in silent amusement as if I had no idea.

‘It’d be nice if that rabbit was cooked before we get to Oregon, Charity.’

‘Shut up,’ she says, shooting me a sideways glance. She hands the knife to me, ridding her hands of fresh blood against the grass. ‘How’s it going with Silas — I mean *Snylas*?’

Getting all huffy, I lop off a bit more flesh than I anticipated. I soon rectify my mistake, not letting any good meat go to waste. ‘You need a new way of making fun of my accent ‘cause this one’s gotten pretty tired after all these—’

‘We have the same accent. You just don’t talk proper. Answer the question or I’ll make you.’ A smirk appears on her face.

I interrupt her before she can tackle me to the ground. ‘Exactly the same as before. Nothing’s happening because I don’t want it to.’ Ain’t hard to understand. I don’t wanna be married off at nineteen to a family friend, even if it makes us a bit more money. Obviously I care, just not enough to put myself in that position.

‘Mama ain’t gonna be happy, you know.’

‘And that’s her prerogative.’

‘Big word.’

We explode into cackles, clueless as to what’s *that* funny, a sound soon overshadowed by the fire’s roar as I empty the meat and vegetables into the pot, my hands made slick from the lard and blood. The feeling grates against me like the tickle of hair against sunburnt shoulders, so I resign myself to taking a walk to the river. I fight the urge to wipe my hands on Charity as I kick off my boots, feeling the ground against my feet for the first time in an age. It’s a sensation that transports me back to childhood, the kiss of the sun against my forehead taking over from Daddy for a moment. That was the last time I felt as if the world was an adventure I could take on myself, before I realized that was the ignorance talking, before the absence of those who made me feel indestructible. The taste of salt against my lips awakens me from this stupor, and along with it I swallow all my feelings about Daddy – bury them with him – and sink into the embrace of the abyss below me.

I’m thrust back into reality as Charity and our older brother Cyrus launch splashes of water at each other. The most obnoxious one yet arcs through the air, reflecting the sun and the laughter. Then it cracks me square in the face.

‘Oh, I am gonna get you back *bad*.’

The two of them shriek like we did in the yard fifteen years ago as they fight against the water to escape each other. I form

miniature tsunamis between my palms, a silent threat looming over their heads.

Then comes into view a woman doubled over, ribs stuck out like a washboard, bursting her skin at the seams. The will of whatever afflicts her is stronger than her frail body. She alternates between hoicking up some foul amalgam of vomit, blood, and mucus, and falling back onto the riverbank, too devoid of energy to hold herself up. My inactivity captures Charity and Cyrus' attention, and they notice along with me the churning of her stomach. *That cannot be good.*

We evacuate the river before another thought has the opportunity to manifest itself. That's when it dawns on me – both the reality of this migration and the diagnosis.

'It's dysentery.'

The journey to Kansas is bleak.

June 29th, 1846

Reaching Courthouse Rock is the first sigh of hope we've felt in a while. It's a jagged goliath of stone that cuts through the horizon, breathing space into the air that's hung heavy over our heads. It's funny how something I've never seen before feels so familiar – a landmark of progress shared only in tales is now in front of me. I'm still haunted by the visions of what happens when the right sickness takes hold, but the fear ebbs with each new sun and lesson. Bar the sputter of the beans in the pot, our camp is silent. Distant voices break through every so often, revealing snippets of tall stories or idle chit-chat among weary acquaintances.

As he sits down beside me, Silas unclips his suspenders, then

rolls up his sleeves.

‘Howdy, Cordelia.’

Before I turn to check, I know Mama’s eyes are fixed on me, her mouth fighting not to curl up in celebration – her plan’s working out. I can’t be mad at either of them somehow. It’s not their fault I want nothing to do with it.

‘Hey.’ I can’t find it in myself to be rude but it comes out curt. Regardless, I humor him for a while, talking away about nothing. The conversation falls into a comfortable rhythm, like chatting with an old friend – emphasis on the friend part. I wrap my arms around my legs, forming a solid resting place for my shivering jaw.

The whistle of the prairie wind through the grass is punctuated by the scraping of cutlery and long shadows recede by the glow of the fire and emergent sun. I pull my shawl tighter around my shoulders, its frayed hems threatening to dirty themselves in the beans. I swallow, introducing the new warmth to my body. It’s survival foremost but comforting, nonetheless. One thing the food can’t comfort though, is the wave of dread that washes over me like the day’s dust. Silas must have noticed the look on my face.

‘What’s up?’

‘Nothing much. I just can’t shake this feeling that something’s gonna go wrong.’

‘There’s no reason to think that. We’ve made it this far.’ He has a point. Doesn’t stop my mind racing, though. ‘Don’t they always say the weak ones would’ve croaked it of dysentery before they’ve even left Missouri?’

I laugh. ‘Probably. Saw it with my own eyes.’

Silas grimaces. ‘Oh, yeah. Sorry.’

I don’t know why anyone would feel the need to apologize for that but I won’t make him feel worse. I hate to admit he kinda

helped.

‘It’s fine, honest—’

My gaze drifts off to the distance, led by an instinct that reasoning hasn’t caught up with. I startle at the thumping of my heartbeat, a noise that soon becomes intertwined with an un-matching rhythm. I narrow my eyes and there I identify the cause. Hoofbeats. No one I recognize in the silhouettes. Not that I would anyway, as everyone I know is here – my imagination went off grasping at straws. ‘The riders’ faces come into view in the golden dawn, expressions nestled somewhere between pain and determination – it’s impossible to know – what I do know for sure is that they’re Indians.

I straighten up to the sound, noticing the hunched bodies of our party frozen in place. Everyone is the same, except for one outlier. Isabella, the Kirbys’ third oldest daughter, drags herself up to standing, pulling a pistol from her waistband.

‘Isabella, stop it,’ her mother says. Her voice fades into the background.

‘Get out of here, *savages*,’ Isabella spits, half-closing one eye and taking aim.

Now is not the time to try and make her see sense with any appeal to empathy or cold, hard fact.

Mrs Kirby shouts to her again. ‘Isabella—’

The shot is expert and the arrow hits Isabella in the middle of the chest. Any hope for her abandons itself as the crimson soaks into the fabric of her dress in a near-perfect circle. She falls to the ground, bolstered by her sisters’ arms. Her only brother, barely four, shrieks and hides in Mrs Kirby’s skirt as she sobs. From afar, it reads like a Renaissance painting.

As soon as the horses disappear, we resign ourselves to head-

ing straight on to Nebraska.

With each day that passes, the weather becomes more unbearable, revealing the weaknesses of my blonde hair and freckled face. I don't have the energy to care when we reach Nebraska. The land stretches on in merciless silence, blurring at the edges, sometimes fading into nothing at all. Whatever grief we experience is eclipsed by the pressure of the back of a hand against a fevered forehead and the pulse ringing in my temples. They tell me the things I see aren't real and speak in hushed tones to one another about death and delusion. The sky weighs heavy over me, the party warping, reality dancing in mirages.

I let my eyes fall closed, praying tomorrow is kinder – to give me reprieve from this cruel game, whether it means death or survival.

July 2nd, 1846

I come to surrounded by unfamiliar faces. I'm enshrouded in a patterned blanket, reflecting what I thought was my demise. My skin is sticky with sweat or anxiety – I don't know which.

'Mama?' It comes out weak, far from the shout I intended. 'Charity? Cyrus?' The faces move towards me, feathered angels on this side of the veil of death. 'Silas?'

I lie still, frozen by disbelief, and it's then when I realize that underneath the blanket, I'm naked. I hug the fabric closer to my body as if that changes a thing. Someone presses a cool, damp cloth to my forehead.

'You're awake. Been in the sun much too long, girl.'

I don't know if my internal confusion translates to my face

or if she senses it on me. She takes my hand, a warm smile settling into her features. 'I'm Winúŋna. We found you a couple of days ago.'

Bile threatens its return in my throat, anxiety worsened by the hunger that grips at my insides. 'Where's my family?'

'No sign. They must have been well on their way.' Before questions or fear have time to take root, she continues. 'Dakotah promised to get you back the moment you were up on your feet again. We washed your clothes while we cooled you in the river – you get dressed and I'll get him.' She gestures to the dress hanging by the woven hides, the cleanest I've seen it in a long while. I wrap myself in the blanket, taking heed of the nod Winúŋna gives me towards the hut. Her footsteps are soft on the undisturbed earth. I return a smile as I attempt to refamiliarize my limbs with the art of movement.

By the time I'm changed, a black stallion awaits, saddled by a man a year or so my senior with waterfalls of plaited hair even darker than his steed. He helps me onto the horse, getting me settled in front of him. I'm grateful, not only in my exhaustion, but also in my limited knowledge. The most I ever learned about farming is how to yoke oxen, and even then, I'm last choice. Winúŋna hands me a bowl of something warm and spiced – what I assume to be a stew – parting with lips pressed to my forehead.

'Don't eat too fast. Your stomach needs to get used to food again.'

'Thank you, I—' My simple thanks doesn't seem to be enough.

'You're a sweet girl. Good luck.' She turns her attention to Dakotah. 'Get her back safe.'

'I promise.' I can tell by the tone in his voice and the scars on his body that he means it. With that, the horse bursts into a sprint

under Dakotah's full control.

The journey passes with ease – conversations flow underscored by the gallop of the stallion and the wind through the grass. I can't tell whether it's the stew I eat in cautious sips, or the close presence of experience, but I'm filled with a new sense of strength. The feeling of another heartbeat steadies my own into a comfortable rhythm, and I find myself absorbing the beauty of the prairie for the first time since April. It's like I see it through Dakotah's eyes.

'It's so beautiful.' I relax back into him, granting myself an improved view. I worry I've overstepped the mark, that he's somehow sensed my ulterior motive. He doesn't move, though. His only reaction is a subtle hitch of breath I'm not sure if I imagine.

'Many a beautiful view out here.' He clears his throat, silent for a moment, and then points off into the distance. 'That's Timpe Nabor. Independence Rock, as your people call it.'

From here, it's about the size of Dakotah's outstretched hand, and after sizing up the time I have left with him, I gather the strength to follow the length of his arm with my eyes all the way up to his face. In profile, his brows are furrowed, as if sewn into the bridge of his gently-hooked nose. It's a picture of fierce determination – safety – above anything else. I've never before looked at a man this way. A blush blooms across my cheeks, bursting forth into vermillion splotches as he meets my gaze.

'What are you looking at?' The tone is teasing but comfortable. Before I can answer, he breaks into a smile and stoops down to settle his chin into the crook of my neck. The closeness sends ripples of goosebumps across my skin.

The horse's stride evens out as we approach the rock and a patchwork of wagons comes into view. Comfort takes me in its

embrace, and for the first time in a while, I allow myself to feel it – what feels like the shortest day yet out here draws to a close, hope rising on the horizon.

I throw myself from the saddle as soon as I see Charity's hair tumbling in the wind like balls of cotton. Her face is tear-stained, and she seems aged – no longer my baby sister. Her eyes sparkle as they meet mine.

'Cordie?'

Her disbelief ties her to the ground for an eternal moment, and then she bounds towards me, mirroring me as I stumble over my feet. For a while, not one word is shared between us – just the scent of dust, spices, and sunshine mingling as we cling to one another. I refuse to let go until she does. Charity squeezes me tighter, then steps back as if she's scared her arms would pass through me like I was a mirage. Through sobs, she gasps out questions and exclamations that echo back at the threat of silence, drowning out Mama as she thanks Dakotah with a matching vigor.

'We thought you were dead, Cordelia,' Mama says.

'Real doozy of a story,' I mumble.

'So did we, ma'am. But here she is.' Dakotah claps me round the shoulder, urging me forwards. 'Go see the world, Cordelia.'

I return his crooked smile, a chisel forced into my hand as I'm whisked off to the face of the rock. I have to fight to tear my gaze away from him. I replicate the sound of disappearing hoofbeats as I join the rest of the party in carving my name into the stone, immortalizing our journey. I imagine missing the monotony sixty years from now as I lie in repose under a quilt.

July 1846

I next wake as we approach Soda Springs, having slept the entire way in the back of a wagon. As I inhale the smell of my own sweat and notice the dust on my palms, I realize that whatever folly my mind embarked on back at Independence Rock may not have been my waking imagination after all – instead, a budding dream. I fight the urge to slip back away into the fields of my mind, lulled by the gentle rocking. The wheels slow and I prop myself up onto my forearms. I find myself embroiled in an argument with the idle side of my brain, a quarrel interrupted before it concludes as the wagon jolts over something.

I'm thrown from one end of the bed of the schooner to the other, an avalanche of food, tools, and spare parts landing on top of me as the wagon topples into a slant. By the time I free myself and jump down using the jockey box as a step, chaos has ensued. It doesn't take long to work out why. A pale shadow of his former self, Silas lies under the wheel. He's alive, but his breathing is heavy, his eyes chasing shapes that don't exist. He talks of angels as his hand loses grip on the first comfort to reach him. Mama worked as a nurse for a rich family in her younger days. She shins around, ducking in and out of the congregation surrounding Silas, helpless despite her knowledge. She directs me towards the front end of the wagon alongside Cyrus and Ira, to shift the weight from his body. There's no blood when the wheel lifts, and Silas' skin is clammy to the touch as we move him aside. The wheels crash back to the ground, throwing up plumes of dust and splinters as the spokes crack, though the commotion is lost in the filth. When the wagon settles, a somber silence joins it. Two fingers pressed to the side of the neck and a shake of the head draw a line under the entire affair.

We bury Silas that afternoon.

I join Cyrus and Ira in fixing the wagon as a means to distract myself from my feelings – the guilt of refusing Silas’ father’s wishes to lay him to rest by the water. Then there’s the painful twangs of relief, Dakotah’s absence, the grief, the anger at it all.

‘Are you alright, Cordelia?’ Ira asks. I imagine the burden of this question has been passed back and forth between him and Cyrus. ‘Dumb question.’ At least he’s self-aware.

My gaze wanders to the shallow grave we dug with battered shovels and shaking hands. Mama leads Silas’ father through a prayer she only half-remembers, Charity echoing in the moments of gasping silence. A tear rolls down my face, and Ira changes position to block my view. My hands are too weakened by emotion to even try for grip on the tools as he takes them from me.

‘Don’t worry about this. Go wash it all away.’

I wish I had the energy to argue. I strip down to my undergarments and immerse myself, unashamed in my nakedness as I summon forth the memories of Dakotah’s soulful gaze. It’s an oasis of sorts, the carbonation of the water an unfamiliar sensation that further grounds me in hazy distraction. I let the blemishes of the day wash away, each ripple a reminder of what’s lost and what must still be endured. I reemerge a while later, letting the sun dry my skin before I dress.

I walk alongside Charity and Ira, sharing stories, singing songs – anything to lift spirits, even if just for an hour. It’s less helpful at Snake River when a few of us nearly drown and we lose most of our food to the churning depths. Even then, Oregon drawing closer on the horizon keeps us going. That and the hardtack. It has to

be good for something. Taste is not one of them. We shrug off our original plans to stop off at Fort Hall and drop by only for the necessities – when the end is this close, it's impossible to wait for anything.

August 30th, 1846

A chill tinges the air as summer draws to a close, heat fading into budding winds. As we travel further north, the more the threat of snow looms. There's no logical reason to worry as we reached Independence Rock before July 4th, but logic hardly has two feet to stand on out here. Just gotta take it as it comes.

Only a matter of days later, hope comes rolling over the hills. It's a physical freedom, but also a mental one. The anxiety drops out of our bodies like fresh-steamed linens, tentative smiles spreading across battered faces. Hope, it seems, was stitched together through every hardship, every smile, every moment shared along the journey. This is the evidence of it all – high time for it. The land is plentiful, the grass is green, and every acre is filled with joy, laughter, and music. *Almost* everything was worth it.

September 2nd, 1846

Ira's out for the morning – something to do with his joinery work, I presume, but I've never asked. I wet a rag and wring it out into the sink. I heave out a sigh and begin to dust the trinkets I've collected over the past nineteen years and five months. Nothing much else exists of the house yet. It's just foundations, a temporary place

to shack up in while we build something better. It's strange starting all over again – this being it after all the plans, dreams and stories. A knock comes at the door. I assume it's Mama dropping off a pie or Charity coming by to wake snakes like we did as kids, but the height of the silhouetted figure suggests otherwise. I turn the handle, perplexed, but then comes into view the black waves dancing in the September breeze, now freed from their plaited restraints.

'Dakotah?'

'I didn't think you were gonna answer. I asked all over—'

I can't find the right words. Instead, I throw myself into him. I'd expected never to see his face again – a living, breathing person I'd resigned to forever keeping as a tale, nothing more, the biggest missed opportunity of my life. Twined in each other's embrace, our breathing synchronizes, inviting in a silence as comfortable as the one back at Independence Rock.

'But how—'

His response falls out in a single breath. 'I couldn't stay away. I waited a few days and followed the tracks you left behind.' He sizes up the idea of elaborating but doesn't. 'You living all alone?'

'No. Mama's planned me and Ira's wedding for a few weeks away.' He was a quick and easy replacement, and Mama always went on about how I wasn't getting any younger. I should've seen it coming.

There's an unreadable look on his face – like nothing I've ever seen from him before.

'How're you feeling about it?'

I guess I've never thought about it like that. I just gave myself up to it – and Mama – no use fighting the inevitable. Then it all comes spilling out. 'I don't mind it. It's nice even, but, I don't know, it should be more than that. People don't write poems or paint

views that are just *nice*. There's something bigger, something more.'

'Like what?'

'Like you, Dakotah.'

He closes the distance between us, taking my hands in his, and in his eyes I find the promise of a future that no longer daunts me.

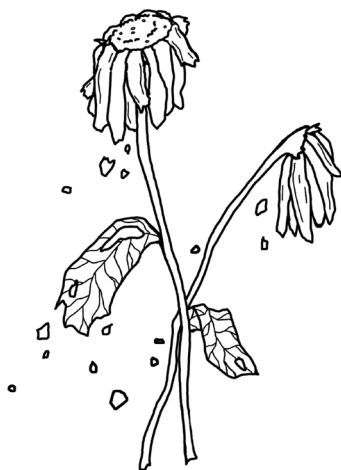
It Wasn't Always What It Is Now

Vil Borodi

Vil Borodi is a writer and poet based in Stratford-upon-Avon,
studying Creative Writing at the University of Lincoln.

Originally from Budapest, Hungary, his writing explores childhood, memory and nostalgia.

When he is not writing, he travels around the world, drawing inspiration from new landscapes, cultures, and fleeting moments.



Hiroshima in the Rain

the rain in Hiroshima falls gently
from grey skies onto white towers
the city still under the spell
of a slumber 80-years,
falsely disguised under the
flashing lights and
faint crosswalks that are washed
away by the rapid flow of midday fall
the traffic that is absent from the roads
that curve their way under overpasses,
through restaurants, shops and bars
is always on time when museums open at 7am
while the sun is still hungover from the
night before
as light fights its shine down upon the
morning hustle and bustle of
a new dawn with a heavy heart

the rain in Hiroshima falls gently
even when those clouds are no longer in sight
when the tourists wrap their fleece
over their waists and lift their maps under the sun

the rain still falls
in Hiroshima
gently.

It Wasn't Always What it is Now

The world wasn't always so
Ravaged by storm
Before lightning struck every hour

There used to be a window that
Only switched off its lights after 2am
A fire that spat its last spark
Long after it had been lit
A rocking chair that let itself be moved by the wind
Years after it felt the touch of a human

The world wasn't always so
Grey and dull
It was full of life and laughter
When the grass wasn't overgrown and thick with
Weeds and dead flowers
When birds sung their songs at the crack of dawn
And fog rose with gold showers of hope

The world wasn't always What it is now.

The Dim Blue Light

Look at all those people
Rising, falling, sleeping, snoring
They are us and we are them
Lost in translation
Transition
Transformation
We wake to fall back into place
In that dream we left so perfect in time
Knowing we'd return for a few moments
Only to find a different episode
From the same series of our lives in a
Liminal space

We share a universal scene
Under a dim, blue light
The skyline never looked so clear
When it wasn't day nor night
Neither moon, nor stars
Above our heads
The only silence were our words Unspoken Unread.

Stardust

Stardust

A slow fall onto the blank canvas of
Desolate love and burning desire
Snow-capped fields of loss
Sprout the calls long forgotten
Of a bustling metropolis we used to call home
Imperfect winter claws its way through the
Warm breeze and summer songs
That too, distorted by the new dawn
Of spring sunrise
Melted by the nausea of a new tomorrow
Each moment a soft-spoken heartbreak
A forgotten promise
We were scared of judgement
Now those fears are clouded by the storms of
Grey matter and twinkling lights
That reign over our old lives
Reminding us that
None of it mattered all along.

Trailblazer

The past came firing back like a trailblazer
Igniting flames
Painting the green trees
With black char and ash
Those raspberry fields
Caught a final glimpse of those lost summers
Three boys before they grew into men
Our laughs are met with the
Crackling of burnt flowers
Those late nights watching the
Stars overhead
Sleeping under the same roof of
The house that refuses to fall
As the storm continues to rage

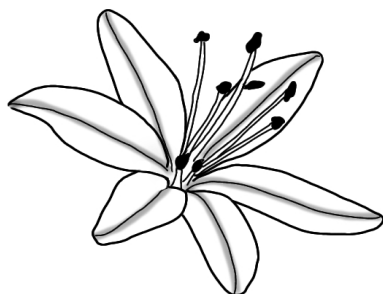
We are all trailblazers
Fighting to return to those days
When we were all together
These fires that never die out
Until we accept no return
Let the sun continue to
Inspire our summer with blue skies
And watch from afar
And just maybe
Those flowers regrow once again.

Asphodelus Albus

Caitlyn Varley

Caitlyn Varley is a writer from Leicester, studying at the University of Lincoln. She enjoys writing things that are both fantastical and strange. She was shortlisted in the Lincoln Book Festival's Flash Fiction Competition. When not writing, she's usually trying in vain to decrease her to-be-read pile.

Content warnings: Blood, mention of kidnapping, mild violence.



The voice in Persephone's head began to talk again.

'I've watched the God of the Dead slaughter innocents with a smile on his face,' it said, overtaking her thoughts, *'And you're trapped in his home. I wonder what he will do to you.'*

The voice lapped against the island of her mind like the ocean but lacked the water's familiar warmth. Its owner turned her dreams into nightmares. Mortals screamed every night, their flesh flayed from their bones by Hades's hands, and she always startled awake, covered in sweat. This morning was no different. Persephone clamped her palms over her ears, knowing it would do nothing to stop the voice; she found a small comfort in the gesture.

Hades had housed her in sprawling rooms; she did not trust their safety. The walls were leaf green, the carpet thick, and intricate gold filigree adorned every knob and handle. If given the choice, she would've decorated it in a similar manner. He provided rich, decadent meals and delivered books and paints to keep her mind occupied. It was a truly beautiful prison.

Tentative knocks rapped against the door, and she palmed the sickle her mother, Demeter, had gifted her. Persephone went nowhere without it as it was always fastened to her belt, forever in reach. She was a poor fighter, but she was willing to slash and hack at Hades if he became any more of a threat.

'Persephone?' Hades's voice was deep and steady, but he always sounded as if he had something else to say. 'Would you like to join me for breakfast?'

'No, thank you.'

He'd asked the same thing for the past thirty-seven days' worth of breakfasts, lunches and dinners. If she hadn't been so wary of him, she might've admired his dedication.

'Are you sure?'

‘Yes.’

‘Is there anything you need?’

‘No.’

‘Well,’ he cleared his throat, ‘A place will be set for you, should you change your mind.’

She chose not to reply and slid out of bed. It took a moment, but she heard him walk away and she breathed a sigh of relief.

‘A wise choice, Persephone,’ the voice crooned, ‘He delights in the taste of flesh, but I doubt he’s feasted on a goddess before. Perhaps you will be the first.’

A shudder danced down her spine, and she shut herself in the bathroom. The bath was ostentatious, taking up more than half of the space with gilded taps and an arsenal of soaps she’d never use up. The marble floor, inlaid with golden veins, had been warmed by the steam escaping the eternally filled bath. She shed her nightgown and slipped beneath the surface.

Deep in the water, weightless and free, she felt as if she could breathe. The voice had quietened and if she closed her eyes, she could pretend she was at home. Above ground, her days passed in blurs of laughter by the lake with the nymphs, the feel of rich soil between her toes as she ran through her mother’s fields, and getting lost in a maze of flowers, her skin sticky with pollen and sweat.

The morning she’d been stolen from her home, Demeter had lectured her once more about the infallibility of maidenhood; Persephone thought the entire notion was ridiculous. She’d escaped to her favourite grove and turned her attention to some flowers she hadn’t recognised. The asphodels were pretty little things and flourished beneath her touch unlike any flower had before. Their beauty hadn’t dulled her exasperation, so she’d ripped a bulb from the soil, wishing it was one of Demeter’s eyes. The ground had

collapsed in on itself, and she'd been unable to do anything as a pair of arms pulled her into the Underworld.

Persephone rose to the surface, slicked back her hair, and screamed.

Hades loomed over her, but he didn't resemble the god she'd seen during her abduction. He wore intricate armour, blood-flecked and polished like glass, and his bident hung limp in his grip. A mortal came up behind him, a sword raised high in shaking hands, but before he could strike, Hades plunged the bident into his stomach. Blood pooled at the mortal's feet and seeped into the water.

Persephone leapt out of the bath, her eyes on the blood as it sat on the surface like oil. She summoned a towel and wrapped it around herself as she hurried out of the bathroom. The strange apparitions faded, but the blood remained.

She dressed herself and took a fortifying breath before emerging into the corridor. She hadn't left her rooms or opened the curtains since arriving, hesitant to see the horrors that undoubtedly awaited her outside. No one leapt out at her, and corpses weren't used for decoration as she'd feared. The floor, walls and ceiling were all crafted from dark stone and for a moment, she thought she was walking through the night sky. Persephone had never seen anything like it. It resembled marble yet lacked veins and was so smooth it was almost soft. She dragged her fingers across the wall, leaving streaks behind.

Her steps slowed as she neared an elaborate pair of doors. They disappeared up into the ceiling and were covered with an engraving of an intricate map. Some points were socketed with precious gems the size of rosebuds; they winked at her in the low light. She pushed the doors open, hoping she had the correct room. Hades looked up from what he was reading, his long torso

hunched over a deep desk.

He knocked something to the floor when she entered and bent to retrieve it. There was a bang and he reemerged, a hand held to his head with a sheepish smile. Had she been in any other situation, she would've called him attractive, though that was a weak term. Looking at Hades felt like staring into the sun. His eyes were murky, like a still-warm handful of wood ash, and his dark hair sat below his nape. It reminded her of the surface of her lake at night and how it rippled in the wind. Pins, shaped like flowers she couldn't quite discern, pinned his chiton together at his shoulders.

'Persephone,'—he said her name like a prayer— 'Can I help you?'

'Make the voice in my head stop.'

She wanted to berate him for sending her the vision of him slaughtering the mortal but found the words inaccessible; they stuck in her throat like unchewed food. She looked away from him and took in their surroundings. They were in an office, which was surprisingly plain given his status. His desk dominated the space, and the walls were lined with shelves, all of them full of specimens in jars. A hand bobbed in clear fluid, giving her a macabre wave. Isolated flowers, some poisonous, some not, pressed their faces against the glass. She wanted to set them free.

Hades rounded the desk and stopped before her, wringing his hands, but she focused on the glint of his pins beneath the candlelight instead of how he towered over her. If they stood side by side, her head would only just reach his shoulder.

'This voice,' he said, 'What does it sound like?'

'A man, and he shows and tells me horrible things.'

He frowned and began to pace the length of the room. She couldn't connect the god before her with the one who had pulled

her into the Underworld, his grip on her so tight she'd bruised. The Hades she saw now was soft in his movements, from the way he walked to how he thought, with his index fingers pressed to his lips. Everything about him was a contradiction.

He rounded on his heel so swiftly that his skin squeaked against the floor. 'I shall investigate this forthwith and get you an answer.' A gleam entered his eyes. It looked inquisitive before it shrivelled into something dangerous.

'The God of the Dead thrives off your pain, Persephone. You have erred in involving him. He will only make this worse for you.'

She had never heard the voice so displeased.

Her body began to move of its own volition, and she found herself fleeing to her bedroom. She glanced back and met Hades's eyes. The corners were pinched, making him appear almost agonised, and a bud of doubt bloomed in her gut. Monsters didn't know pain, but Hades looked as if he knew nothing else.



Something woke Persephone.

She shivered and sat up, searching the darkness for something she couldn't be certain was there. A frozen wind brushed her cheek and startled her body into subservience. She fought for control of her mind, but her focus wavered as a tug, harsh and insistent, began in her stomach. It pulled her from her bed, down deserted corridors and out through Hades's grand front doors as a shroud fell over her mind. Her last attempts at fighting were fruitless: her will was no longer her own.

The Underworld's beauty was quiet. It curled around dead trees and hid in dips between undulating hills. Stars hung low in the

imitation of the sky – it was almost black, yet rich blues and subtle purples and pinks marred it like scars – and danced around each other, somehow alive. Even the grass, as dead as it was, had some charm, derived from withered dandelions whose wishes were long gone, and decaying buttercups. Lanterns, burning with strange blue fire, stood sentinel along the winding path to Hades's estate. Small sounds permeated the air: her steps, unsure against the ground, her breaths, and the voice. It cooed at her over the crackling flames of the Phlegethon, beckoned her past crumbled ruins and the Lethe's forgetful waters.

'Come, Persephone,' the voice said, sickly sweet. *'Do not dally.'*

The path, full of ash, bones and starved soil, gave way to thick slabs of that strange, dark stone. They staggered down into a mockery of stairs, situated above an endless pit. Blue flames in gnarled sconces became green and filled the air with acrid smoke.

The stairs were seemingly endless, and her legs began to ache. Persephone glanced over her shoulder to gauge how far she had walked but saw only darkness; the flames had been extinguished. Cells appeared in the rock face and sobs dribbled out from beneath the doors, the next more haunting than the last. Such agony, paired with the maniacal whispers in her head – *'All of these souls, broken by Hades's hand. Do you wish to be another, Persephone?'* – was no light burden to bear. She paused her descent, grasped her sickle, and tried to turn around.

The tug in her gut became painful as she resisted its will; her feet continued to drag her along, unaware of the battle in her mind. The air grew colder the further she descended and it invaded the stone like a disease. She urged herself on, moving faster and faster until she was running to lessen her contact with the stairs. They ended with a lurch and she stumbled onto a small platform. It was

covered with inscriptions of spells too powerful for her to understand. Persephone stepped closer to the edge and peered into the darkness.

A scarred face appeared, bisected by a fizzing barrier of Zeus's lightning. His hair fell past his waist in tight curls and his eyes were a brilliant shade of silver – too beautiful, even for a god. Her exhausted legs quivered and she fell to her knees.

‘Hello, Persephone. I’ve been wanting to meet you.’

His voice matched the one in her head and any indignation she felt about the invasion snuffed out. Persephone frowned. She looked at the shape of his eyes, at the calculating glint amid the silver, and saw Demeter in them.

‘You must be Kronos.’

Demeter never spoke of the Titanomachy and told Persephone to focus on her future, instead of the tortures of the past, whenever she'd asked about it. She'd relinquished the names of the Titans after Persephone had trailed after her, offering an exchange of answers for silence.

‘I am.’ Groans came from the pit; Kronos shushed them. ‘Zeus sired you, did he not?’

‘Yes.’

‘Then you can set us free. Like recognises like, little goddess. You can cleave through his bolts.’

She froze. She'd heard Zeus's bolts could reduce mortals to ash; had seen gods marred with lightning-shaped scars. As a child, she'd cowered when his lightning forked across the sky, clutching at Demeter's skirts in a pitiful attempt to keep herself safe. Persephone doubted she'd leave her encounter with the bolts unscathed.

Her hand, with the sickle still clutched tight, jerked and she dragged herself toward the edge of the platform. Lightning spat

and bit at her fingertips and she could do nothing but watch as her skin blistered and bubbled. Golden ichor dripped onto the bolts and boiled; sweetness permeated the air, smelling like summertime apples.

‘If you free us, Persephone, I can take you home.’

Kronos’s promise held weight and she moved closer. She couldn’t stop herself, regardless of how hard she fought. Her hips held her aloft, but the platform felt weak beneath her; if she fell, only the lightning would catch her. She forbade herself from crying, knowing it wouldn’t help. Kronos grinned as Persephone teetered. The blade of her sickle began to heat, turning from muted grey to fiery orange as it neared the bolts. She longed to divert its course and plunge it into Kronos’s skull, but her hand refused to respond. The infernal tug began again, intent on pulling her over the edge and onto the cross-hatched lightning.

A thud sounded behind her. Gentle hands took her by the ankles and drew her away from the edge. She twisted, staring at Hades as he glared down at Kronos, nothing but insatiable wrath churning in his eyes. He crouched beside her, his hand in the air as if he wished to touch her but refrained.

‘Are you okay?’ Hades’s voice was soft and it began to loosen the knot tying her to Kronos. She nodded as he eased the sickle from her hand. Her fingers cramped at the alleviation of pressure; pain had never felt so sweet. ‘May I pick you up?’

Persephone nodded again, unable to process the present moment. Her mind was torn, split between weightless freedom and thinking it was still ensnared. She wished to fall into an unending sleep and forget it all. Hades was careful, lifted her like she was precious, and she nestled her cheek into his shoulder. He smelt like a chill coursing through the night and though he appeared lean,

there was a strength in him she hadn't expected. Shadows enveloped them and she closed her eyes as they were consumed by the darkness.



Persephone opened her eyes to an unfamiliar bedroom. She had been set on a large bed, almost double the size of her own, with rumpled silk sheets. Hades's ceiling was identical to the Underworld's sky, but his constellations dipped and twirled within reach. She watched Draco as it cut through the dark, curving around other stars as they glittered. No commentary followed the dragon's flight and she smiled.

Hades stood before her, opened his mouth, closed it, and opened it again. His fingers fidgeted with the loose fabric of his chiton; she'd never seen a god with such a mortal disposition.

'How did you find me?'

He cleared his throat. 'I felt you leave. I assumed you'd gone for a long walk, but once I felt you enter Tartarus, I came after you.'

'How long was I gone for?' Whatever Kronos had done to her had caused deeper impact than she thought. The lost time on her hands felt like the cusp of a memory, so close yet forever out of reach.

'Three hours. Time passes differently in the depths.'

'I'm sorry,' she picked at her skirts, ichor-stained and grimy, 'I didn't mean to inconvenience you.'

He knelt at her feet and put a warm hand on her knee; she took more reassurance from his touch than she thought possible. 'You have nothing to apologise for. It is I who should apologise.'

I should have anticipated that Kronos would prey on your mind. I hate to think what would have happened if I hadn't found you.'

'Could I have released the Titans if I'd touched the bolts?'

'No, they would have destroyed you. Many with Zeus's blood have been led to him. You are the first to return.'

Hades squeezed her knee and she stared at his pins, finally visible to her. They were asphodels, made of exquisite metals and gems, hand-crafted with delicate precision.

'Why asphodels?' she asked, running her fingers over the cold platinum. Its petals shone like pearls and complemented his gilded cheeks. The stones set in the centres were the exact amber of her eyes and the veins in the petals had been kissed pink, as if by her lips.

'During my last visit above ground, I went for a walk and happened upon Demeter's fields. You were in your grove with the nymphs, making them flower crowns. I thought you were the most exquisite being I had ever seen and just had to gift you something befitting your beauty. I scattered the bulbs where I knew you tended to reside and had the wind give you their name.' He twisted his hand and an asphodel appeared between his fingers. He tucked it behind her ear, his nails skimming her cheek as he moved her hair aside.

'You don't know me,' she said, meeting his eyes; the tenderness in them was suffocating. 'Why would you go to such lengths to do something so kind?'

'The Underworld is a lonely place and its despair is inescapable, even for me. I kept going back to your grove, waiting in the shadows for hours, just to hear you laugh. You are devastating and I have become entirely dependent on how you make me feel. I believed my heart to be stone for it scarcely beat, but being in

your presence is the most alive I have ever felt.’ he paused, huffing a laugh; it sounded more pitiful than humoured. ‘The asphodels, whilst intended as a gift, also connect me to you. I felt your distress so I brought you here in the hopes that it would ease your mind, but being here has caused you nothing but pain. If you wish to leave, I will take you back. If you want to stay, it would be the greatest honour to have you in my home.’

Persephone stared at Hades, his heart in the air between them. She had assumed her abduction to the Underworld was a petty slight against Demeter – or Zeus, though he liked to deny any relation he had to her – not something so delicate. She slid from his bed and knelt before him, the carpet soft against her bruised skin. He stiffened when she laced their fingers together.

‘I want to go home but I would like to visit under two conditions.’

His brow creased but he nodded. ‘Name your demands.’

‘I need to know that you’re not as cruel as Kronos made you seem. The picture he painted was an unkind one.’

‘I will do what I can to prove this to you, but there may be some truth in his manipulations. And the other?’

‘I want Kronos destroyed. If that’s not possible, I want him weakened so even the most pathetic mortal could slay him.’

She tightened her fingers around his, hoping her request was not too far-fetched. Hades smiled. ‘My dear Persephone, you are as vengeful as you are beautiful.’ he pressed a gentle kiss to her knuckles. ‘It would be my honour.’

Her answering grin was wide.



The air between them was thick. The tinkling of their cutlery echoed out into the Underworld as Persephone pushed her food around her plate. The fish was delicious – cooked in butter with succulent vegetables and a dusting of pomegranate seeds, paired with a dry wine – but she felt too wound up to eat.

Hades invited her to dinner as he'd escorted her back to her bedroom the previous night. She'd accepted readily and slept the day away, her dreams free of anything wicked. He'd met her outside her door and gave her a tour of his estate with her hand tucked in the warm crook of his elbow, before they emerged on a small terrace. A circular table sat in the middle, bracketed by delicate wrought iron chairs, and withered remains of climbing roses clung to thick columns.

Tender conversation filled the lulls between courses. She learned his favourite colour was amber and lilies made him sneeze. He found lamb too gristly to enjoy and Hestia was his most tolerable sibling. She'd told him about her childhood, Demeter, and her least favourite flowers — of which there were only three. His attention had been on nothing but her the entire time; it both burned and soothed.

‘Is the fish not to your liking?’

Persephone startled and dropped her fork. ‘It’s wonderful, thank you. I was just lost in my mind, I apologise.’

He frowned, more out of concern than displeasure. ‘I take it your mind is still your own?’

Hades had told her that Kronos and the other Titans had been “dealt with accordingly” and she hadn’t tried to fathom what that entailed; she only hoped it’d been agonising. She’d glimpsed his bident when he showed her the armoury and the prongs had

been bright with fresh ichor.

‘It is.’

‘Good.’

She cleared her plate and snuck a few glances at Hades, whose gaze met hers each time. He cut his food with neat strokes of his knife, his hands moving with gentle precision. She wished to inspect them further, to memorise the coarseness of his calluses, to know every scar that bisected his skin and the story behind them all.

‘I—’

‘You—’

They both began. Hades cleared his throat and gestured for her to go first.

‘Thank you for dinner. It’s been lovely.’

‘It was my pleasure,’ he paused to take a breath. ‘Are you ready?’

She nodded and they rose from the table, their plates and glasses disappearing. Hades held out his hand, and she placed her fingers over his; their hands fit together as if they had been crafted from the same stars. He drew her into his arms and held her close as shadows swirled around them. The Underworld melted away, reforming into a copse of trees, not far from her grove. Faraway conversation rippled through the leaves, sounding like rain.

Persephone knew she should step away, knew she should unwind her arms from around Hades’s waist, but couldn’t. His heart thundered by her ear and hers began to pound in tune as he ran his fingers through the loose ends of her hair. She held him tighter and began to regret her decision to leave.

‘I must go,’ he whispered, ‘If you need me, uproot an asphodel, and I will come. Always.’

She drew away with a nod, feeling misaligned without his touch. His hand moved to her cheek, and he brushed his thumb over the corner of her mouth.

‘Until I see you next, Persephone.’

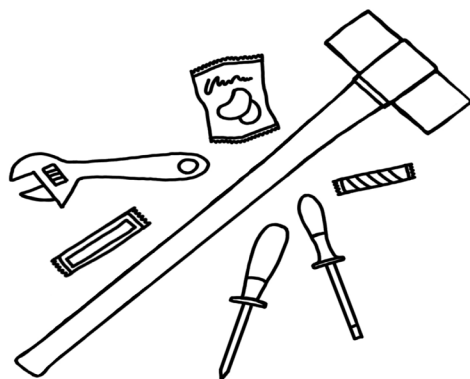
He was gone before she could say goodbye. She repeated his farewell to the space he’d vacated. An asphodel, bigger and brighter than any she had seen before, bloomed at her feet, the ends of its petals dusted grey.

Six Floors Up

Oliwia Buczek

Oliwia Buczek is a writing student based at the University of Lincoln. Born in Poland and raised in London, she enjoys writing fantasy and fiction for young adults and children. When not writing, she is reading or playing video games — from which she draws a lot of inspiration.

Content warnings: Violence.



‘No, listen, unless you fancy getting eaten, our only way in is through that flat.’ Miles’ tone was flat as he tapped his finger at the scrap of paper.

‘*Kolego...*’ Kamil began in Polish, tilting his head. ‘They might wanna snack on your skinny legs, but they’re not catching me!’ He smacked the younger boy playfully across the shoulder.

Ciara sat cross-legged on the couch, cradling her pet ferret, facing the two boys she’d grown up with over the last few years. Her best friends. Ciara was the youngest out of the trio at twelve, but she was a big twelve, with a slender frame and a curtain of blonde curls that always escaped her ponytail. Kamil was the oldest at fourteen, tall and broad-shouldered in a way that made him look like he’d already started growing into adulthood. A few dreadlocks hung from his head like ivy vines. Miles, not much younger, was all elbows and long limbs. His brown hair stuck up in tired tufts from too many late nights organising and inventorying their stocked resources, and now this crudely drawn map.

Ciara watched as Miles hunched over it, glaring with such fierce concentration that she half-expected the map to take pity on them and say, ‘Fine. You need to go here,’ before revealing the best route to the electronics shop. She could picture the inside already: the power banks they so desperately wanted still lined up neatly on their shelves, untouched for the last two months since everything changed — since the ‘zombie apocalypse’ as Kamil liked to call it. Whatever that meant. She stayed as far away from those things as possible. They made her skin crawl.

Still, she often watched from the rooftop; they shuffled through the streets many stories below, dragging their feet, moaning and mumbling nonsense. At night, they’d huddle together and seem to power down, like someone had pressed the off button on

her old laptop. She let out a sigh. The first few weeks had been chaotic. She missed her parents and she and the boys had scrambled to loot food, water, and supplies from nearby flats. There was no time for movies then. But now? She was bored out of her mind. The rooftops that once brought freedom now felt like a cage. Chucking bricks at the undead and scaling rooflines her mum would never have allowed her to before was only so much fun. Now she'd kill to watch her favourite series again. Once lying on the bunk bed with the boys in Miles' apartment, she'd stared up at the ceiling and thought that if one of those zombies came offering her a copy of *Shrek* or *Ice Age*, she'd probably hand over her arm in thanks. Then she realised both boys were staring at her with a mixture of amusement and exasperation.

'I think we're better off asking Grizzly here for input on this plan.' Kamil cooed at the ferret as it skittered over to his lap.

Traitor, she thought.

'Sorry! How do we plan to get into the flat?' asked Ciara. 'That door wasn't giving way at all the last time we tried.' It was also the last house they had yet to loot in their neighbourhood.

'If only we lived across from a bike repair shop.' Miles' gaze stayed on her for a moment, then he rolled his eyes. The other two kids gaped at him. 'Really guys? Maybe there's some big hammer in there? Or crowbars? We could smash that apartment door and go straight down to through the ceiling.' He tapped at the map again.

'Wouldn't it technically be the floor? Or better question, are you gonna do all that?' Kamil leaned in with a smirk.

'Nah, that's your job. Someone must be the brains around here.'

Ciara shuffled in her seat. 'You could let me try lockpicking it, you know. It would be quieter, too.'

‘That would be ideal,’ Miles nodded. ‘If you weren’t scared enough to get up that staircase first.’

She pictured it with a grimace, gnawing at a fingernail. It was tall, metallic, growling at you with every step, which would be fine if not for the fact that half of it was barely clinging onto the platform that connected it to the front door of Flat 16. She’d had a few years of climbing practice in her neighbourhood with her friends, but the thought of a misstep — the sudden drop, the final, humiliating splat against the concrete below — sent a sharp, full-body *nope* through her. It sat comfortably at number two on her internal nope list.

She was about to retort that she was not scared, just as Kamil chimed in, ‘Your lock-picking skill isn’t high enough for that and, oh wait, this is also not a videogame.’

Ciara gasped and crossed her arms.

‘But if you want, I can just carry you up there,’ he added.

‘No way. I need at least one of you alive here, man.’ Miles shook his head with a laugh.

Kamil scoffed. ‘What, so you can have a human meat-shield? Oh gee, thanks.’

Ciara rose from the couch, stretched in the dimness of the living room, and scooped up Grizzly. She blew out a candle and said, ‘Well, I’ll let you guys crack this one. Let me know in the morning what the plan looks like. I’m down for whatever if we can get into that shop.’

The next afternoon, Ciara stood alone beneath the metal staircase, bundled in a thick puffer jacket with her hands jammed deep into her pockets. The whole structure loomed above as if it was judging

her. Honestly, it was better this way — no boys, no teasing, no audience. Attempting something mildly stupid was always easier solo. She swung her arms once, twice, then jumped. Her fingers gripped the cold metal edge of the middle platform. It felt like grabbing hold of winter itself. She wasn't exactly strong or tall, so the climb up took a lot of huffing, puffing, and kicking. One moment where she considered giving up. After some struggle, she finally hauled herself onto the ledge and stood up straight, lowering her head while bringing her hands to her hips, chest heaving. If only the boys could see her now, then maybe they'd shut up about her fearing the stairs. She peeked down past her trainers at the very long drop beneath her and regretted it. One slight wobble of her legs could send her toppling over. A weight shifted on her left shoulder. Grizzly, secured in her little blue harness, sniffed the air.

'Pretty good, eh?' she whispered, rubbing the soft fur under the ferret's chin.

It gave a slow, lazy blink — about as close to an applause as she would get. At the top platform, Ciara cast a quick glance toward the apartment door they'd failed to breach last week. But instead of heading for it, she vaulted over the metal railing and climbed onto the slanted roof, letting the wind buffet her curls free from her hood. From the peak, she turned in a slow circle, taking in their little chunk of the world. The rooftops stretched across the neighbourhood in a haphazard jumble, a collage of soot-dark chimneys, rusty ladders, metal vents, and forgotten sheds. None of the roofs matched; each looked like it had been designed by a different architect with their own understanding of what a roof should look like. The angles clashed, the tiles didn't line up, and everything felt stitched together by accident.

Kind of like my friends and I, she thought.

Sometimes the gaps between buildings formed narrow troughs, where pigeons nested and empty crisp packets drifted until they were swept away by wind or rain. Miles said the rooftop vents were due to stop working any day now without maintenance. They hummed beneath her boots like someone snoring in the next room.

Beyond the rooflines, the high street curved toward the horizon. The road was a freeze-frame: double-decker buses abandoned at odd angles, cars scattered like forgotten toys. The yellow road markings were faded and ghostly. She could see the hulking block of the Odeon cinema and the smaller, familiar shops — Primark, Specsavers and Poundland — lined up like nothing had gone wrong at all. She couldn't see the electronics shop from this angle, so her eyes drifted toward the red-fronted Wimpy further down the street. A tight pang gripped her chest. The old man who'd worked there had always been kind, even when they thundered across the rooftop above his head. He gave them sweets. She remembered eating there with her mum once. A while ago. A lifetime ago. She wondered if he was down there now, wandering with the rest of the strange, broken adults. She didn't dare look for her mother among them.

Ciara shook her head hard, as if dislodging the thought, and turned to scan the opposite side of the road. She lifted her palm against the sun and narrowed her eyes until... there! Two figures on the roof of a bus: Kamil and Miles, gym bags slung over their shoulders, looking like apocalypse delivery boys.

Miles had woken her up early that morning, waving his map and plan around. She'd barely listened, too many late-night manga chapters but she got the gist: the boys would use the bus roofs to cross the street without touching the ground, hit the bike shop,

and grab whatever tools might help crack open Flat 16. Early afternoon was the safest. That was when the adults below were less active, apart from the night-time. She watched them hurry down the length of the bus, with Miles keeping far from the edge and Kamil running along as if he didn't have a care in the world. Miles spotted her and waved. Ciara returned the gesture with a grin, just as Kamil threw both middle fingers up, mocking the crowd gathering below. The undead clawed at the bus windows, arms stretching up but never high enough. Her stomach tightened anyway.

She kept her eyes glued to the boys as they climbed halfway down the back of the bus, hopped across onto the shaky bus-stop roof, and disappeared through an open apartment window, one they had cracked open earlier. From there, they'd slip into the shared stairway and loop back around to Miles' flat to regroup, where she could proudly pretend that she hadn't nearly fallen off the staircase a few moments ago.

Ten minutes later, Ciara had crossed the rooftops again, climbed the rattling stairwell, and slipped into Miles' place. The doorknob gave its usual stubborn wiggle before letting her in. The hallway beyond was dim, growing darker the farther she walked. The good days of electricity felt like a myth now; light only existed where the sun physically touched and Miles rationed their candles like they were made of gold. According to him, they needed to 'preserve every resource for maximum longevity,' which roughly translated to sitting in the dark unless absolutely dying.

When she stepped into the living room, Kamil was already there, eyes bright as he brandished a long iron crowbar. He tossed it between his hands, testing the weight, admiring it. Miles gave her a nod from his seat; chocolate smeared at the corner of his mouth like he'd lost a battle with a brownie.

‘Did you get everything we need?’ she asked, glancing between them.

‘Yeah, come look,’ Kamil dropped the crowbar onto the dining table with a loud clang. He yanked the gym bag open, the smell of rubber, metal, and dust drifted out. The bag was stuffed. A hefty sledgehammer poked out; beside it lay two smaller claw hammers, tangled in a coil of thick, knotted rope. There was also a set of mismatched screwdrivers, a rusted wrench, and wedged between all the hardware, a handful of treat bars, crisps, and a crumpled pack of gum that Kamil must’ve swiped on impulse. Ciara stifled an amused smile.

‘Awesome! Good job, guys. So, when do we go?’ She tilted her head just as Miles, with the delicacy of a raccoon, plucked a bar from the pile and tore it open.

‘Well, we can go now, if you’re free?’ Miles said around a mouthful of chocolate, sarcasm dripping from his tone.

‘Oh, rah-rah.’ She rolled her eyes. ‘Can I bring Grizzly with us?’

Miles’ gaze flicked to the ferret perched on her shoulder. His expression hardened. ‘No.’

‘Why not? What’s it gonna change?’

‘It’s safer to leave her here. She’ll just get in the way, Ciara.’

‘I take her everywhere, though. Please, she won’t get in the way.’ Ciara’s voice softened. Her throat tightened. Grizzly wasn’t just a pet. She was a piece of normality. A gift from her mum. She turned to Kamil, eyes pleading for backup.

Kamil’s face wavered, lips pressed into a thin line. He looked between them with a shrug. ‘I know you want to, but... the man’s got a point, Ciara. It’s just not necessary.’

Her chest stung. She wanted to stomp her foot, argue, plead

— anything but cave. But she wasn't going to be a baby about it. 'Fine,' she muttered, the word coming out more venomous than she intended.

Miles mouthed *sorry*, guilt flickering in his eyes before he uncrossed his arms and moved to help Kamil ready the bags — checking the hammers, looping the rope, making sure nothing metal would clang too loud at the wrong moment.

An hour later, the three of them stood outside the door of Flat 16. Ciara sat on the narrow metal steps, fiddling with the zipper of her coat as Kamil hammered away at the door with the sledgehammer. *Pang. Pang.* Each strike echoed painfully. Miles leaned against the railing nearby, a rucksack sagging off his back like it personally resented being carried.

'Any luck so far?' Ciara asked, rubbing at one ear as Kamil paused to swipe sweat from his forehead.

'I think one more should do it. The hinge is almost out.' He hauled the hammer back over his shoulder and brought it down with a roar of effort. The wood splintered with a long, wounded groan. The doorknob shot free, whizzing past Miles' head so fast he yelped and flattened himself. Kamil froze mid-swing, wide-eyed, then scratched the back of his head and gave an awkward, 'Uh... sorry.'

Ciara stood as all three leaned in. Dust swirled in the air. Kamil threw an arm out to keep them behind him until the haze settled. Then he entered first, shoulders tense, sledgehammer poised. His head snapped left, then right. A moment later he lifted a hand in the all-clear. They slipped inside one by one, Ciara last — her nose twitching, fighting off a sneeze.

The flat felt like stepping into someone else's forgotten life. The wallpaper was a faded floral print, peeling at the corners. A

scratched black leather sofa slumped against one wall, lace curtains drooped in front of the window, yellowed with age. Dust coated everything like a second skin. The air carried that stale, shut-in smell of a place that hadn't heard a human voice in months.

'Someone's nan definitely lived here,' Ciara whispered to herself. She never did see anyone enter or leave the flat, even before all of this.

'I think the best spot is over here,' Kamil called, waving them toward the dining room. He shoved a heavy wooden table aside, legs screeching across the floor, kicking a couple of mismatched chairs out of the way.

Miles dropped his bag beside him and knelt to inspect the spot. 'Yeah... that should put us right over the middle of the shop floor. Good access point.'

Kamil rolled his shoulders and took a steady breath. 'This might take a while, guys. You might as well get comfy.'

Ciara obeyed, sinking into the grandma-couch, which let out a tiny ghostly *wheeze* under her weight. Her hand drifted automatically toward the TV remote resting on the coffee table, before she remembered the dead electricity and let her fingers fall back to her lap. Miles disappeared down the hallway, probably to check if the bedroom or kitchen held anything salvageable. The pounding resumed — deep, heavy blows that rattled through the floorboards. Minutes stretched. Dust drifted from the ceiling. Ciara hugged her knees and listened, counting each thud like a heartbeat. Then finally, after a particularly forceful swing, the wooden floor beneath Kamil shuddered. A sudden crack split the silence — then the boards gave way entirely, collapsing inward with a sharp, splintering crash. He scuttled away to safety.

The hole yawned open into the darkness below.

Their way into the shop.

'Nice. And now we test.' Miles' voice grew closer as he rounded the corner, excitement in his voice, a brick heavy in his hands. They gathered around the hole as Miles tossed it in, their curious faces crowding together. Ciara watched as it landed moments later with a bang down on the shop floor. After a few breaths, there was still silence. No sound of rushing, gurgling monsters.

'Good to go, then.' Kamil announced, dusting off his palms before glancing at Ciara. 'You're going in first.'

'Wait, why? Why me?' Ciara spun to look at him in a mix of confusion and rising anxiety. *Maybe I should've listened to the plan more*, she thought.

'You're the lightest-' Miles began, but Kamil cut in with, 'Guinea pig!'

'What if there's something down there, though?' Her voice was quiet as she watched Miles shoot Kamil a pointed look.

'Oh no... scary, dusty computers!' Kamil laughed but he must've seen her face as he paused. 'There isn't. We just checked. If there was anyone, they would've all come rushing out.'

Although he had a point, it didn't stop her hands from trembling. She took a moment to inhale and approached the hole, pausing to stare. Kamil walked over, a coil of thick rope heavy in his hand. He lifted it high over her head and began wrapping it around her mid-waist. 'We'll reel you up if you get scared, okay?'

Now she was *really* regretting not listening better but she bobbed her head quickly. Down she went, dangling in midair as the boys slowly released the rope and she descended, her feet closer and closer to the shop floor. She spared a glance up and was met with overly enthusiastic gestures of thumbs up.

She was down. She cowered like a spooked fawn for a mo-

ment, but when all seemed clear, she spun around to take in the entirety of the electronics store around her. Shelves and display racks, gaming consoles, laptops and controllers caged behind a window of glass. Stacked vinyl records. She stood on her tiptoes to peer over a tall rack. Then she saw them. They sat farther away, tucked into a corner of a display rack behind rows of neatly lined-up disks and video-game boxes. The power banks. Three of them, as if they were left behind specifically for the trio. The heavy blanket of dust that covered everything in the shop didn't spare them, but in the dimness, she could make out that they were still intact.

She turned back to the hole and looked up at the two faces gazing down. 'All clear!' Ciara announced. 'And I can see the power banks, but I can't get that far with the rope around me.' She gestured to them, being met with shouts of encouragement from above.

She stood beneath the thin shaft of light filtering through the tattered ceiling and worked the rope loose with hurried fingers. It slipped free and dropped to the tiled floor with a dull, echoing thud. She stepped over it, then squeezed herself between two shelving units and moved deeper into the shop, closer to where she'd spotted the power banks.

The light dimmed as she went, the brightness behind her thinning to a weak glow. She edged forward on careful steps, heart thudding, until she rounded the corner and almost collided with something crouched against the wall. It was hunched over, knees drawn to its chest, face pressed into the corner. For half a second, her mind refused to make sense of what she was seeing. A startled gasp tore from her throat — then everything blurred. She staggered backward, her spine cracking painfully against the sharp edge of a counter as the figure lurched upright. The zombie's pale face

snapped toward her, its eyes hollow and fixed. Shouts echoed down from the hole above. Something heavy hit the floor behind her but she was already running. She bolted around the shelving toward the glass cage at the front of the shop, breath rasping in her chest, tears blurring her vision. The thing was fast — too fast. One mangled arm thrust through the gap between vinyl racks, clawing and scraping as it forced itself after her. Metal rattled. Tiles squealed beneath its feet. Ciara slammed to a stop as the cage blocked her path. She was cornered. Her thoughts spiralled uselessly. *Zombie. Zombie. Zombie!*

She braced herself against the metal frame and stared back at the adult woman. Hard to think of it as that. 'It' was more fitting. It pressed its decaying flesh against the bars and snarled, yellowed teeth snapping inches from her face. Ciara had never felt smaller. Then it shrieked. Ciara flinched as the zombie twisted away from her, attention caught by something darting across the floor. A flash of brown fur.

A flicker of blue fabric.

Grizzly!

Her heart leapt into her throat as the ferret scuttled across the tiles, fearless and fast. The zombie lurched after it in a clumsy scramble of grabbing hands and stumbling feet. Sneakers squeaked against the floor as it gave chase, but Ciara could only watch, frozen in place, chest hammering as she clutched the counter behind her. She barely registered the boys dropping through the hole in the ceiling, one after the other, hammers raised. She didn't see what happened next — she didn't want to. The sound was enough. She clapped her hands over her ears as a wet, awful squelch echoed through the shop.

Outside, it took several minutes before she could breathe properly again. Now she tottered between the boys, still unsteady, eyes fixed on Miles' half-zipped backpack — on the soft movement in-

side. 'You brought her?' Ciara's voice cracked slightly.

Miles didn't turn around straight away. 'I feel like I only ever say no,' he murmured. 'I wanted to say yes. Just once.'

'Good call,' Kamil snorted. 'Movie night?'

'Absolutely.'

Ciara gave a light smile at that. The world was broken, but for now, she looked forward to warmth, a glowing screen, and a story playing where everything turned out okay.

The Last Train

Laura Wilds

Laura Wilds is an English writer, who is studying Creative Writing at the University of Lincoln. She mainly writes in the coming of age and horror genres, with a few comedic undertones.

When looking for inspiration in writing,
she often compiles a playlist of songs.

Content warnings: Swearing, suicide.



The city's final train of the night thundered above, its fading roar swallowed by the tunnels below as Elias Ward ducked under the rusted barrier. His phone torch cut through the dark like a spotlight on a dead stage. The light danced across old tiles, collapsed signs, and the graffiti of those who never made it back to daylight. Half of the neon letters had dulled; the kind kids used to tag before the barricades went up. Elias could still make out one of them, it read *THE STATIC KIDS*. He touched it, the paint peeled off under his fingers and stuck to his skin.

The air was thick with dust, coating his lungs, and the metallic scent of Station Nine was something Elias had long forgotten. Each of his steps echoed like an accusation, bouncing off the walls and returning to him with double the damage. Somewhere deeper in Station Nine's maze, water dripped in a steady rhythm, almost matching his pulse. He turned to look up the stairs; the light outside had shrunk into a small dot, a dying dot, barely clinging to the edge of the world he had come from. It felt impossibly far, like a memory fading away faster than he could reach for it. A choice entered his mind; go back up to the light or continue into the darkness. Elias felt the ground tilt, as if his entire world were sinking back into its grave. He told himself he'd come back to face his past, to lay it to rest. But even as he descended the last ladder into Station Nine, Elias knew he wasn't here for peace. He was here for Jonah.

Elias paused at the bottom of the stairwell, his phone light trembling. 'Pull your shit together, Elias. Don't be a pussy,' he said. He remembered coming here once before, years ago – before it closed, before everything collapsed. Back then, the two boys treated these tunnels like their own personal kingdom. They'd sneak down, covered by darkness, with their guitars slung over their backs, a bottle

of some cheap liquor to share between them. Jonah had a special kind of gravity – a reckless gravity, that Elias was attracted to. He was the kind of person who would somehow turn a dare into a promise. Elias was the complete opposite, quieter, always playing catch up, half in awe and half afraid of the day when Jonah's fire would burn out and take him with it.

Looking around the station, Elias could still see him – leaning against the tiles, laughing at nothing, playing a nameless tune on his guitar. Jonah was never still; when he talked his entire body did. He moved like he was fighting gravity itself, just for the thrill of winning. He was just what Elias needed – Jonah pulled him out of his shell. He said things like:

'If we're going to be nobodies, we might as well be loud about it.'

When their dream to have a band fell apart, Jonah just shrugged it off.

'The city will listen someday.'

The night Jonah died, they'd come down here again – mad at the world and drunk on nostalgia. Jonah was his usual self, flailing his arms around and yelling profanities into the air. Elias turned to look at the platform on the right, where they always sat. He could hear faint voices, close but distant, heated yet calm. He couldn't remember what they were arguing about that night. Only the sound of a train getting closer, the screaming of metal on metal, and the sudden stillness after. That stillness had never left Elias. It's with him now, wrapped around him like a web. Looking closer at the pillar Jonah always used to lean against, he could see letters etched into the tiles.

T.S.K.

Jonah had etched those letters the first night they hung

out there, with his flick knife. Elias reached into his pocket, pulling out Jonah's knife. It was predominantly silver, with small details of red up the metal handle, Jonah's favourite colour. Opening the knife, Elias traced the letters with the tip. Tears began to well in his eyes as he finished tracing the *K*.

'Elias,' a voice whispered. Elias snapped his head around and used his torch to scan the surroundings. He was certain the voice was right next to him. Goosebumps trailed around his neck and down his arms.

'Who's there?' he said, turning towards the tracks. Silence, the water still dripping somewhere in the distance. 'I said who's there?' he repeated. All Elias could hear was the echoes of his own voice, bouncing off the station walls.

'Don't you remember me?' the voice spoke, louder this time. Elias spun around again, walking towards the central path between the two platforms. It felt like the voice was coming from everywhere, almost as though the station itself was talking.

'Where the fuck are you?' Elias shouted, growing impatient.

'That's no way to talk to a friend,' the voice continued. Elias cleared his throat, his right hand beginning to shake. *'It's been ten years. I thought I'd never see you again,'* Elias combed his fingers through his curly brown hair. *'You know it's me, don't you? You're sweating, breathing faster, and that heartbeat of yours sounds like it's trying to win a race,'* the voice taunted Elias.

'J – Jonah?' Elias asked.

'You sound scared. Why is that? It's only me. It's Jonah,' he replied. Elias' torch began to flicker, his breath hitched.

'How is that possible?' He asked, walking closer to an alcove where his torch couldn't seem to reach.

'Why did you come back here?' Jonah retorted. His voice began to

echo around the station, taking over.

Just as Elias reached the alcove, his torch flickered again. This time, it turned off. His shoes screeched on the tile as he came to an abrupt stop. He fiddled with his phone, trying to turn his torch back on.

'*Elias*,' Jonah said, a song beginning to play in the distance. It was the first song they wrote together, in this very station. As the melody went on, Elias remembered what its name was; 'A Train to Nowhere.' They often took inspiration from the environment around them; 'The Pillars of My Heart', 'Broken Tiles', 'Don't Cross the Tracks.'

'What's happening, Jonah?' Elias shouted.

'*You're sweating, breathing faster. Just like you were that night on the South Side Bridge*,' Jonah replied. Elias' light flickered back on. '*Remember how you struggled to slow your breathing? And I talked endlessly so you didn't pass out? I kept telling you to stay with me, and you did. Do it again, El*,' Jonah continued. That's when Elias saw him, sitting on the platform edge. He had his legs over the platform edge, guitar in hand. He was the one playing 'A Train to Nowhere.' Jonah looked just like he did that night – alive, grinning, unburned by the years they've spent apart. Elias walked closer to him, still struggling to believe this was all real.

'Jonah!' Elias yelled out and ran to him. He sat down next to Jonah. Both their legs were now swinging over the platform edge. Elias looked to Jonah, who was smiling at him.

'*What took you so long, huh?*' Jonah teased.

'Is it really you?' tears welled in his eyes. He swallowed hard, the way he always had when emotion rose too quick – force it down, don't let anyone see. Jonah used to joke that Elias was made of stone, but Jonah was the only one who could see the cracks. Jo-

nah raised two fingers to his temple – an old signal that meant ‘I’ve got you.’ Elias felt his breath hitch. They hadn’t used that gesture since they were kids. Elias felt something inside his give way. Not a sob – nothing so dramatic – but a shudder, a loosening, the smallest surrender he’d ever allowed himself.

‘It’s not your fault I’m dead, but it sure as hell seems you stopped living without me.’

‘I felt as though I couldn’t live without you,’ Elias whispered. A single tear rolled down his cheek.

‘I’m always here El,’ he pointed to his chest. *‘Always.’*

Elias opened his mouth, wanting to say everything he never said when Jonah was still alive. How scared he’d been, how much he’d depended on him, how Jonah made the world make sense. But the words got caught in the back of his throat, just like always. Jonah watched him with an expression Elias had only seen once or twice; soft, patient, almost unbearably knowing.

‘You’re still doing it,’ Jonah said quietly.

‘Doing what?’ Elias asked, even though he already knew.

‘Keeping everything in. Pretending you’re fine because the world told you to be.’ Jonah plucked at the guitar strings, the notes warm and low, filling the empty station like a heartbeat. *‘You were always the quiet one, El. But quiet doesn’t mean empty.’*

Elias curled his hands into fists, nails digging into his palms. ‘You don’t know what it was like after,’ he whispered. ‘When you were gone, everything changed. I couldn’t explain it to anyone. I didn’t know how to.’

Jonah nudged him with his shoulder, a familiar pressure from a world that ended. *‘You could’ve talked to me.’*

‘You died,’ Elias snapped, harsher than he meant to. The sound echoed, thin and brittle. ‘You left, J. You fucking left. And

everyone kept telling me to grow up, to move on like it was nothing. But it wasn't nothing.'

Jonah stopped playing.

'You think I wanted to leave?' his voice was suddenly so human it hurt. *'You think I didn't see how hard life was already on you? We were kids holding each other up, El. If I fell, you were never supposed to fall with me. You weren't weak. You felt things deeply. That scared you more than anything.'*

'But you weren't supposed to leave!' Elias whined.

Jonah placed the guitar down on the tiles. He turned fully to Elias.

'El, listen,' Jonah murmured. *'You put every emotion in a box and buried it. You did the same thing with me. But grief doesn't die just because you tell it to. It just waits. And you came back here because it stopped waiting.'*

Elias felt tears slip down his face faster than he could wipe them away. His shoulders shook – not violently, not dramatically, but in the small, exhausted way of someone who had been carrying too much for too long.

Jonah lifted his hand, hesitated, then touched Elias' cheek with the back of his fingers. It was impossibly familiar – the gentleness, the warmth, the unspoken promise in the gesture.

'You were always the one I worried about,' Jonah said. *'Not because you were fragile. But because you never let yourself break.'*

Elias closed his eyes, letting the touch anchor him. 'I didn't want anyone to see me fall apart.'

'Then let me be the first.'

Elias opened his eyes again, meeting Jonah's. And for the first time since Jonah died, Elias allowed himself to break – like thawing ice.

Jonah pulled him closer until Elias' forehead rested against his

shoulder. It wasn't a hug – not really. More like the echo of one. A memory of comfort made tangible.

'You're still here,' Elias whispered. 'Why?'

'Because you needed me to be,' Jonah replied. *'Because you couldn't move forward until you stop pretending you didn't love me.'*

Elias froze.

Jonah exhaled, brushing his thumb gently across Elias' temple.

'Not in some grand, romantic way,' he clarified softly. *'In the kind of way that saves two boys who were drowning long before the train came.'*

Elias swallowed, breath shaking. 'I did love you.'

'I know, I loved you too. More than either one of us knew how to say.'

The entire station began to shake, an impossible vibration as if an approaching train were coming through the station that had been closed for years. Jonah stood and signalled for Elias to join. Elias looked to Jonah, confused, he could hear the train getting closer.

'What's happening? This station has been dormant for years!' As the train got closer, Elias could barely hear himself think. Jonah turned to face Elias.

'I know you wanted to say something to me earlier, but you chose not to! And I also know you feel responsible for what happened to me.'

Elias closed his eyes; tears fell down his cheeks. When he opened his eyes again, Jonah wasn't in front of him, he was stood at the edge of the platform. He turned his head to look at Elias, tears in his eyes. He stepped down onto the tracks and turned to face Elias.

'Wait! Jonah!' He ran over to Jonah and got down on his hands and knees to reach for him.

'Go back,' he said, under his breath. *'You don't have to carry everything alone, El. Not then. Not now,'* he continued.

‘Jonah, please!’ Elias cried out.

‘It’s not your stop yet,’ Jonah reached his right arm out to meet Elias’ and just as they were about to touch, everything stopped. The vision disappeared. Jonah was gone, so was the train.

Elias shuffled away from the platform edge until his back was against one of the pillars, still crying. All he could hear was the dripping water and his own ragged breathing. Using the pillar as leverage, he stood up.

He began to walk away from the platform, filthy and trembling, trying to wrap his head around what just happened. He’d been down there for so long that the dawn sunlight was spilling into the station, causing Elias to squint as he got closer to the stairs.

He began to climb the stairs; a mixture of cigarette smoke and petrol fumes filled his lungs. He didn’t feel any lighter, just empty in a way that made room for a new problem. He felt Jonah’s absence, like seeing him get hit by the train again brought closure. But how? Why?

‘You don’t need to carry everything alone, El. Not then. Not now.’

As Elias reached street level, he turned his phone torch off. It was 6:33am. ‘Jesus Christ,’ Elias said to himself, as he rubbed his forehead. ‘See you on the next line, man,’ he whispered.

In Lint Condition

Arlo Fidler

Arlo Fidler is an English writer based in Nottingham, who is currently pursuing a degree in Creative Writing at the University of Lincoln. They specialise in short-form fiction, preferring to write light-hearted plotlines with loveable characters.

When they aren't writing, they can be found drawing characters or playing video games.



How often do you clean your house? All of it? Not just the corners where the spiders build their webs, but the cracks in the bricks, the curls of the wallpaper edges.

Places where only dust bunnies could reside.

You might believe that you don't house any – that would be naïve of you. Dust bunnies are everywhere, with their bodies of lint, fur, and hair. Leaving a trail of mess everywhere they go.

They hide themselves in that old box of photo albums that you keep in the loft. You forgot to tape the top shut and now they've wriggled their way in between the cardboard flaps and snuggled up beside your daughter's security blanket. Boredom is a dust bunny's most notable trait, so it didn't take them long to move on to the Halloween costumes when they found them. Fancy that, lots of tiny dust bunnies nestling into the fabric of your black cat costume you dressed up in when you were a kid. You may have forgotten you had it. Probably would throw it away if you knew you did. But what would be the need? It's still being used.

Now, don't think that dust bunnies only live in your loft. Remember, they are everywhere. Perhaps you're thinking,

I don't need to know this; my house isn't that dusty.

Maybe you're deciding to ignore the dust bunnies, and you don't mind them being there. If so, go ahead. Stop cleaning, stop dusting and Hoovering – soon you'll understand.

The cottage on Acorn Crescent was only small enough for its two larger residents, a senior couple you probably knew. For the rest of its residents, it was paradise. You see, the couple were too elderly to clean; the old man hadn't left the house to retrieve his newspaper in years, the old lady never left her armchair long enough for the imprint on the cushion to fade. The grandchildren had stopped visiting months ago, and eventually, the ivy on the

outside walls crept around the cottage and trapped everything inside. Nobody remembers it happening, nobody thought anything of it – did you?

The dust bunnies remembered. They prefer it this way. With no children kicking up their messy creations and no dreaded dusters searching for their hideouts, they're free to do as they please.

As the bathroom was downstairs, there was seldom reason for the couple to venture upstairs. Apart from at nighttime, that is, when even though the woman now slept in her armchair, the man still spent the night in their bedroom. Each night and every morning, he slunk down the left side of the staircase, clinging to the shaky banister, and the dust bunnies hid beneath the carpet runner until he passed.

As soon as he was gone, the dust bunnies would roll themselves down the left side of the stairs. Some of them would rub themselves against the edges of each stair, like cats marking their territory, as others slid down the banister, coating it with a layer of their presence, just to do it all again the next time the man approached. The rest of the house was untouched by the elderly residents, and free rein to their unwelcome lodgers.

You may have heard that moths eat your clothes if you leave them in your wardrobe for too long. That's why shops sell little pockets of scent crystals, to deter the fluffy, winged creatures from feasting on the fabric. Now, what you wouldn't know is that this isn't the moths' fault at all. For years, dust bunnies have been munching on whatever fabric they can find, and the humans have always blamed the moths. Have you ever *seen* the moths themselves chomping on your abandoned T-shirt? Or did you just ignore the dust surrounding your wardrobe when you took it out to inspect the holes?

One of the grandkids had left a pair of dirty trainers in the shoe rack inside the cottage on Acorn Crescent one rainy day. They never retrieved them. The mud dried, crusted to the sole, and clung to the sides. The dust bunnies nibbled on the shoelaces like dandelion stems, crunching through the aglets and munching through the rest.

So, as you can imagine, the dust bunnies had a wonderful time. With shoelaces as snacks, daily television to watch and a banister to slide down, wouldn't you be, too?

Unfortunately, it couldn't last.

Soon, the old man didn't slink up the left side of the staircase anymore and stood in the living room was an empty armchair, cushions deformed but unoccupied.

The dust bunnies didn't seem to mind. Rolling each other down the slanted back of the armchair, and down onto the leg rest, this was just another thing to play with. They nestled in between the cushions during the night and waited for the television that never turned on again.

Without the old man to light the fire, the cottage on Acorn Crescent grew cold. The dust bunnies wrapped themselves in aged cobwebs and huddled together to stay warm, cosying up in the old man's bed when the nights were freezing.

Life was as normal as it could be, the dust bunnies still slid down the banister, still swung with the pendulum in the grandfather clock, and still surfed on lost buttons in the bathroom sink. Eventually, the entire house was covered in dust, lint, and hair from head to toe.

That was until the cleaning company arrived.

You know their title; you know what's to come. Mint Condition Cleaning was the predator; dust bunnies were the prey.

When the door to the cottage on Acorn Crescent opened that day, sunlight highlighted the dust on every surface. Even the particles couldn't hide, as they floated through the air and returned to their place on the disturbed carpet.

Life as the dust bunnies knew it was over – vacuums, cleaning sprays and micro-fibre cloths erased months of their existence within mere days whilst the critters hid anywhere they could.

This makes the cleaners seem like bad people, but have *you* ever thought about the dust bunnies' hard work when you clean *your* house? The company were merely doing their job and cleaning up an empty, dirty house in preparation for the new tenants to move in, however disastrous that was for the tiny inhabitants.

After the third day of chaos, the dust bunnies knew they needed to find somewhere permanent to hide.

In the corner of the bathroom was a crack in the wall, barely noticeable to you and me, but like a cave entrance to them. Inside the crack was a hole and inside the hole was a mouse nest, still housing the mice who had created it. Maybe the dust bunnies could live with the mice, they thought. But when the mice began to pile the dust bunnies into the structure of their nest, the lint critters knew this wasn't somewhere they could stay. They wriggled free, much to the dismay of the mice, and continued on their way.

Moving only during the night to avoid the cleaners, the dust bunnies thought maybe they could live alongside the spiders in the hidden corners of the cottage. The spiders were welcoming enough, but they soon found out that the webs they'd wind were far too sticky. There was no room to bounce and play, and being stuck on a web all day was boring. So once again, the dust bunnies moved on.

They hid beneath furniture before it was removed from the

house and squeezed behind the curls of the wallpaper before it was ripped from the walls. They tried the bedroom, the bathroom, the kitchen.

Nowhere was safe for the dust bunnies anymore.

Even the carpet runner they had hid behind all those times the old man had walked past had been ripped off, rolled up, sent out the front door.

The dust bunnies had no choice but to return to the loft.

The cleaners had been up there when they'd first arrived, to remove the boxes of memories past. The floor was unstable, unsafe for lumbering beasts like humans but completely habitable for dust bunnies.

When they squeezed through the trapdoor latch, the dust bunnies were greeted by emptiness, no boxes to cosy up in, no Halloween costumes to try on, but the dust they had left behind all those years ago still rested there, so they knew this was home. And home it stayed. New tenants, new cleaning companies, same old dust bunnies.

So, if you *do* clean your house, and you really like to get at every speck of dust in every single room, stop and think for a second. It's very likely that you have your very own family of dust bunnies living in your loft, decorating your old boxes and just trying to make a home of their own.

Lincoln's Fallout

Oliver Birkett

Oliver Birkett is a writing student from Peterborough, currently studying at the University of Lincoln. He enjoys writing fiction, mainly in the form of fantasy however he sometimes writes sci-fi or crime thrillers. When not writing, Oliver enjoys reading books on Greek mythology, and watching tv shows/gaming when the reading gets boring.

Content warnings: Violence.



The view of the city astounded me, to put it simply.

It was something I could not begin to describe in its entirety – the sky glistened with a slight orange hue as the clouds wrapped beyond the medieval buildings, roads paved in stillness – life bustling everywhere you looked. A cathedral stood tall before me, enshrouded by the glistening of Christmas lights, which was the main point of focus from where I was stood. Beyond it, there were endless roads of beautiful architecture that I had never seen anywhere else, despite having travelled to many places in my twenty-five years of living. There was something so peaceful to me about the simple essence of human life across diverse cultures, how every house contained a story that was unknown to the vast majority of the city's population.

In spite of this, it had become apparent to me that this town, in particular, used to be a place of serenity, of limited expectations – which it succeeded in providing. Most people were content with living their day-to-day, but that was merely the surface of it. There is so much history that they do not tell you about, in fear of harming their “oh so precious” ideologies and revealing the withering beneath all.

At least, that's my opinion. Most people do think I'm quite cynical at times.

Anyways, let me get to the point. Despite it merely being a year since I graduated, I found myself exploring in and around the city once again. I had moved back home with my family for the time-being, as finding a job was harder than you would expect.

Seriously, I have 9 GCSEs, 3 A-Levels and a bachelor's degree.

And I still cannot find a job?

Make it make sense.

I was taking a guided tour of Lincoln Castle, as I had always

been interested in its history, and considered the mythology surrounding this place to be consistent with the architecture itself. There are so many hidden pathways and dimmed cobblestone paths that always have a story behind them – and there is nothing more magical than a city that seeps with history, making you wonder how different life was in the past to inspire this folklore.

However, this particular tour guide was clearly inexperienced.

He had been uttering complete nonsense for the past ten minutes, and had the gall to come out with, ‘The castle itself was built by William the Conqueror in 1268,’ which was responded to with murmurs of agreement, and a few gasps of awe.

I could not let this slide. How can something as simple as when the castle was built get lost in time – first of all, all it takes is a simple Google search to reveal that the castle was in-fact built in 1068, not 1268.

Who knows, maybe it was his first day.

Second of all, how could everyone in the crowd (bar me) take his word for gospel? Is that what society has been reduced to? A bunch of snivelling drones who will take the side of every Tom, Dick, and Harry they happened to have paid money to? Opinions used to be formulated by yourself, in your own head – but now there is an underlying herd mentality in which no one wishes to challenge figures of authority in fear of embarrassment, or worse.

Personally, I think this needs to change. Why not start now?

‘Excuse me, but I believe the castle was built in 1068, not 1268.’

Upon speaking the truth, I was shot with a few distinct glares, mainly from the tour guide himself, who had taken what I said into consideration, formulated an opinion, and promptly responded with, ‘No.’

There was a short bout of silence whilst he was glaring at me dead in the eyes, time itself standing still. A few onlookers shuffled and coughed, but no one dared to interrupt.

‘I don’t believe so, you’d think that if anyone knew, it would be me. Maybe leave my job to the professionals?’ he uttered, with a harsh emphasis on the word “my”.

The air in my lungs swiftly escaped and my eyes gleamed with a sense of urgency, fists clenched so tightly that my fingernails were ripping into my skin – trying to contain the influx of fury that was coursing through my veins, the blood pumping so vigorously you’d think it would burst.

I had never been angrier in my life. I don’t know what took over me, maybe it was his sneering, unapologetic tone, or the fact that the majority of the crowd had been snickering under their breath when they heard how I had been belittled. This was a shock to me in the moment as I had never been one to reduce myself to anger, always opting to take the upper hand in most conflicts and be the bigger person, but today was different.

It had felt like an eternity had passed since I had said anything, and the air began to grow thick with tension as everyone waited in anticipation for my reply. The castle was now almost wrapped in a blanket of mist from the clouds above, rippling with thunder that instilled turmoil into everything it surrounded. Rain had increased tenfold, and the bustle of the city had been drowned out with a sense of urgency - this was certainly no natural thunderstorm, but here I am again getting distracted.

So, I had merely chuckled and spoke, ‘Alright mate, do your research next time,’ as I watched his cynical smirk drop instantly – coincidentally timed with a strike of lightning which struck the top of the Observatory Tower, reverberating through the castle walls,

striking panic into the hearts of the rest of the group.

The tour guide had forgotten all about our confrontation and turned his focus onto the impending doom that had not existed mere seconds ago. A cacophony of screams and cries from children rang throughout the air, people disoriented and disorganised, as nobody was certain what to do in this situation.

‘Shit... shit... this was not supposed to happen,’ the guide muttered whilst simultaneously hyperventilating, as another member of his team passed him an inhaler and led the group down the walls of Lincoln Castle, away from the thunder and into the end of the tour.

But I had other plans.

You see, the elusive Magna Carta Vault was closed for refurbishment, and it had been since I graduated a year ago – which was a great shame, since I had never been able to experience the feeling of being so close to such an important piece of history. The reason I came on this tour was so I could try sneak into the vault, unbeknownst to the staff here, as risky as it might be.

Ironically, the lightning could have been the best thing that happened to this tour, as I had been able to slip past the eyes of the tour guide and sneaked into the building that housed the Vault. Upon entering the building, I had swiftly gone left down the stairs, and after some searching (and a few more staircases), I found myself inside the Magna Carta Vault, which was in its current state – dark and quite frankly, a bit unsettling.

Understandably, I had forgotten about the devastating thunderstorm that was wreaking havoc outside. When I had entered the vault in such a rush, the rain was astronomically bad, to a level I had never seen before. I remember thinking it was weird, as I had checked the forecast when I was on the LNER to Lincoln that day

– sipping on my latte I had purchased on arrival to the train station (extra shot, sprinkle of cinnamon) and saw that it would be sunny all day, no rain in sight.

As I frantically rustled through the front of my jean pockets, I pulled out my phone and turned on my torch – taking delicate care to put it on the lowest setting, as I didn’t want to damage anything. You see, even though I had “broken into” the vault, per say, I still had to act with the upmost decorum.

And there it was – in all its glory.

The Magna Carta.

A document that stated no one was above the law, not even the King. Unsurprisingly, my whole body had gone into shock upon the mere sight of this thing, like it was an ethereal eldritch being that had been lost for eons. The slight bask of light gleaming unto the document was akin to the glow of an angel. There were unimaginable levels of purity radiating from it – something so blissful you could not begin to fathom.

I had never been more tempted to open something in my life, something so divine before my eyes – containing such a treasured, memorable piece of history.

I had to open it.

As I placed my hand on the barrier surrounding the artifact, the entire vault shifted – steel walls came thundering down with a bang, the shockwave emitting so much kinetic energy it had rippled across to where I was stood, throwing me across the room and into the wall – crushing my hand underneath me in the process. A crescendo of an alarm echoed throughout the cold, steel crypt I was trapped in, piercing in an intermittent pattern that rung persistently as I faded in and out of consciousness.

Obviously, I was oblivious to it all now as I was almost fully

unconscious, my eyelids fluttering beyond recognition, leaving my vision bleak and dreary, unable to focus on anything. The only thing that seemed to snap me out of it was a second, sound-barrier shattering bang, that clearly came from outside the vault – which shook the walls so vigorously that most of the podiums holding other documents shattered instantly, leaving precious artifacts soulfully fluttering down to their impending doom.

Despite this, the podium holding the elusive Magna Carta was still standing tall, like a great oak in an expansive maple forest, resistant to any harm that may come to it.

The aftermath of the explosion had been even worse than the first. My head had smacked on the steel metal of the cage I was entrapped in, and once again on the cold, stone floor. I was reduced to a lifeless, unrecognisable husk of myself, strewn across the vault floor, surrounded and mostly covered in rubble from the cracks in the walls – leaving just enough room for me to breathe.

Now, I know what you're going to say.

You shouldn't have done that.

You shouldn't have touched it.

Unfortunately, I did. I could not possibly describe how much regret I hold, but I cannot change the past – as much as I would like to.

An unknown amount of time later, I had regained consciousness – only to realise that the Magna Carta Vault had been reduced to ruins, simply a shadow of its former self, and was now completely engulfed in a profuse layer of steel and rubble. Due to the vault itself being almost entirely destroyed, I wondered how I was still alive, and what had even happened since I'd been out.

Using all of my strength to push myself off the floor, I was met with a singeing pain that shot down my left leg as I felt the

bones in my ankle crack even further, oblivious to the fact the bone had ripped out of my skin and was fractured in several places. Every fraction of my body wanted to give myself in to the pain, but I had to get out of this death-trap eventually.

The pain was indescribable – not only could I see the cause of my agony, but I could feel it everywhere. My head ran hot with flushes, the sclera of my eyes burning with a vivid passion, as if they were pouring with blood. My leg itself was basically useless – I had lost feeling in every nerve possible, whilst concurrently feeling more than I had ever felt, and the pressure on my hip caused my heart to palpitate, droplets of sweat running down my forehead into my eyes.

Every second that passed, the torment increased, as I had forced myself to hold on to the still-intact steel wall behind me – using the support to get a hold of myself and take in my surroundings. And do you know what? After all this destruction and decimation, the Magna Carta itself still stood tall – completely untouched by any rubble, debris or even dust that had surrounded it, as if there was a forcefield put in place to protect the artifact by divine forces at work. I had mentioned earlier, before the current events unfolded, that there was something so numinous and mystical about this city, which seemed to reign true in this, and many cases.

I could not just stand here and feel sorry for myself anymore.

First things first, I desperately needed a doctor, and I was not going to receive medical treatment in, what was now, a soulless crypt of despair. As I tried my hardest to inch myself closer to the steel doors that had forcefully shot down, the very concept of reality was shifting before my eyes – a plethora of fractures appeared before me, splitting my vision like footsteps on broken glass.

I had fashioned an umbrella I brought with me into a walking cane, using it to put pressure elsewhere rather than on my broken ankle, as my right leg still worked fine, thankfully. This would have been really helpful, if it wasn't for the absence of level flooring, causing me to trip over almost every step.

As I finally got to the door, after what had felt like an eternity, the pain was still the worst I had ever felt, but I was coming to terms with the reality of the situation as most of the shock in my body had disappeared. There was a console implanted into the wall next to the door, which seemed to be the only way to open it – and after inspecting closely I quickly realised the controls were quite simple, including three separate buttons,

1) OPEN

2) LOCK

3) OVERRIDE

Tightly gripping my umbrella, I hoped for the best and slammed the **“OPEN”** button, which responded with a beep – the sound reflecting itself around the vault. Immediately, the vault door retracted, hissing and unlocking its many bolts – the pressurised air releasing and the hydraulics within the mechanism twisting and turning, grinding against each other – causing the old steel to creak and groan upon opening. There was an initial clink sound that was followed by the shrieking of metal reverberating itself around the vault.

Once the door had finally opened, the light from outside was so powerful that it had caused me to wince upon sight of it, holding my forearm over my eyes to reduce the ever-increasing burning sensation. The rush of stifling air tickled my skin, searing it ever so slightly as the smell of sulphur wafted into my nostrils – combined with notes of burning plastic, rubber, and something ungodly,

something I had never hoped to have experienced.

Seeping into the vault, past my legs, was a dark, ominous mist which appeared to cast a shimmer in the reflection of the light above, intertwining flowing rivers that run as red as the blood of this castle's enemies, and as black as the River Styx itself – as if Lord Hades himself had caused the events of today.

As I reached the top of the staircase, the entirety of the castle around me was much like the vault, in a sense – completely and utterly reduced to rubble, the same hot, searing sensation plagued my skin and every thought I could muster, the bustling of life no longer present, and the rain had ceased.

Not a drop in sight. Clouds had dissipated, and there was a grave stillness that lingered all around – a dark, green hue agitated the earth itself, as the sounds of an empty, desolate wasteland echoed for miles around.

Beyond the walls that had seemingly kept me mostly unscathed, the streets were full of anguish. Acres of fire rippled across my viewpoint, homes so wrought with destruction it was like William the Conqueror had invaded again, and the worst thing about it?

There was nothing that would indicate survival. No cry of help, no attempt of rescue. Just a cold, gloomy mist that had wrapped itself around the city, devoid of any hope in itself – which was not an accurate representation of this place, at least not as I know it.

But now?

At the front of the castle, lie the gates – which were mostly intact, only for the fact the doors were splintered and fractured. The groups of screaming people had disappeared, which was a positive, however as did the very promise of life, which brought me right back down to reality. Upon realising what was just beyond

the gates, I immediately let out a gasp, which I caged within my right palm – left hand still clutching the handle of my umbrella as it scraped the cold, stone floor beneath it.

The tour guide I had been arguing with not too long ago had been completely incinerated by the blast, his corpse now one with the paved cobble paths, his entire being reduced to nothing but dust – which stained me with a feeling of dread that slithered its way through my body, tearing out any glimmer of hope I had left.

Surrounding the “corpse”, was a single, gleaming bottlecap that stood out due to its iridescent shine in the reflection of the dark, black mist that had enshrouded the city.

Using most of my remaining might to lean down and pick it up, I clasped it firmly within my right palm – peering intently to notice something that instantly gave me a bad feeling. Written on the cap, clear as day, were the words, “**Glad you enjoyed your stay!**” which was highlighted in bold, Times New Roman lettering, ink still fresh to the touch.

Albeit nothing else, this indicated that somewhere out there, possibly even watching me, life was to be found.

Now the question is, will I find it?

Or will it find me?

A Real-Life Murder Mystery Party

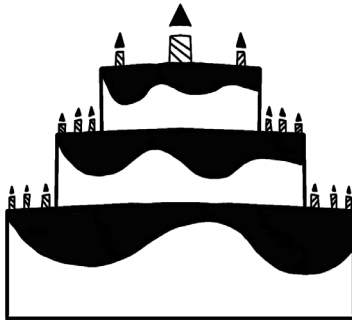
Maddison

Maddison is currently studying Creative Writing at
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She enjoys writing fiction for young adults and gets a lot of her
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When she isn't writing she is either playing *Animal Crossing*
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Content warnings: Murder.



Eloise wasn't answering the door, and she hadn't read any of the birthday messages that had been sent to her that morning.

Sophie and I had arrived at her house earlier than the others to help decorate and get things ready for the sleepover that night. Sophie had been off school that day, but she was feeling better by the afternoon. The three of us had been friends since we started school. Eloise's parents were reluctant to agree to a sleepover on a school night. However, she was able to persuade them as she did well in her exams. *Worked every time.*

As the driveway was empty, we assumed nobody was home. I knocked on the door again. No answer. My jeans were starting to feel heavy, as we had walked from the bus stop in the rain. We shuffled closer to the door, with our overnight bags slung over our damp shoulders and huddled together under the door canopy. That was when I noticed a birthday card that hadn't been pushed through the letter box properly, moving up and down in the wind. I took the card and as I pulled away, the hinge of the door creaked towards us. It had been left ajar. I inspected the envelope. No stamp or writing. Someone must've been to the house to deliver it themselves. The rain had begun to pick up, and even under the safety of the canopy it had begun to spit at our shoes. Sophie suggested we go inside to get out of the rain. I had no complaints.

Inside, the house was dark and cold, which made us think nobody had been home for most of the day. Eloise's parents would always have the heating on during the colder months, and their house was always too warm. I placed the card on the living room table with the other unopened birthday cards and presents. I thought it was strange that Eloise hadn't opened her gifts that morning. She'd been hoping to receive a new bag for school. We put our bags down and went upstairs.

In Eloise's room, there were things all over the floor and her bed wasn't made. Strange. She wouldn't let us touch anything when we went over because she didn't like her things being out of place. It was as if someone had been looking for something in a hurry and hadn't had time to put anything back. Eloise went to a different school to Sophie and me; it was a private school. We rooted through Eloise's school bag to find that she hadn't been that day. She hadn't written anything in her books. Her phone was on her dressing table, and the lock screen showed all the missed calls and messages she had received. I wanted to unlock her phone to see if there was anything that suggested what had happened, but I didn't want Sophie to wonder why I knew her passcode and she didn't. Eloise and Sophie had been arguing more than usual, but they had been friends for so long that I thought they'd sort things out.

From the bedroom window we could see that the girls who Eloise knew from school had arrived. We rushed to the door to let them in. None of them had heard from Eloise, and they confirmed she hadn't been at school. We spent the evening searching through Eloise's things to find anything that could've suggested where she was. We were scared but we didn't want to go home. Calling our parents would've meant trouble. Sophie told us calling the police would've meant worse.

We ordered pizza as it was getting late and we were hungry. All of us were worried about the delivery driver being concerned with us being at the house alone, but he didn't ask any questions. Afterwards, I went to put the rubbish in the outside bin as I knew it was to be collected the following day. I used my phone torch to look inside the bin as I could see something on top of the bin bags, but it was too dark to see it properly. A knife covered with blood

had been disposed of without any attempt to hide it. I didn't want to tell the others, so I put the pizza boxes on top and headed back inside. *Perhaps it was strawberry jam from birthday cake. Maybe they celebrated early and forgot to tell us they were going out of town.*

When I returned to the house, I knew what I had to do. I looked to the table at the birthday card, still spotted from the rain. I figured they would've been the last person at the house before we arrived. The others were still in the kitchen, so I told them I was going to the bathroom upstairs. I took the card with me as I passed through the living room. Once I got upstairs, I opened the envelope in my hand. It wasn't a birthday card at all, but an invitation written in a familiar handwriting. It was Sophie's work. The invitation read, *'You're invited to a real-life murder mystery party'*.

I went through Eloise's messages. Sophie had suggested a murder mystery theme for the party. They had been into town to get decorations for the party so the three of us could make the house look on theme before the sleepover. We had found some whilst we were going through Eloise's bedroom, but we thought they were left over from Halloween. Sophie never mentioned anything about a murder mystery party to me.

A light peered through the window, followed by the rev of a motor. It was Eloise's parents, pulling in the driveway. Her parents had forgotten about the sleepover and were shocked to see us. It turned out that Eloise hadn't been to school that day as her parents didn't mind her spending her birthday at home. Eloise had reluctantly agreed she wouldn't open her presents until the evening so her parents could watch. However, they had returned home from picking up her birthday cake after finishing work early to find she was missing. After searching through the house, they went out

looking for Eloise. Her parents had left her phone in her bedroom where they found it so she could phone them if she returned. The front door had been left open for Eloise as she hadn't taken her house key. They hadn't reported their daughter missing as they wanted to give her the opportunity to return home.

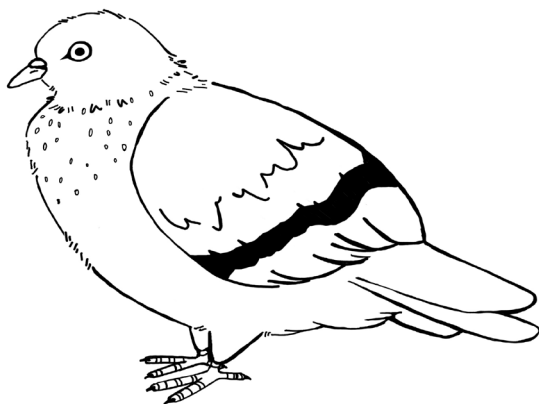
I kept my distance from Sophie that night when we went out searching for Eloise. I didn't tell anyone about the knife or the invitation, but deep down, as much as I didn't want to admit, I knew the truth. Sophie murdered Eloise. It wasn't just a murder mystery themed party. It was a real-life murder mystery. I looked at her face from across the street as we walked past the houses, shops, schools, and parks. A smirk. She was enjoying herself. If it was just a game, Sophie would've gone home victorious, but things were only about to get worse.

Birdsong

Billy Mitchell

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Birds sang to him as he wandered down the road, each whistle going straight past his ears and to his heart. A simpler man, a man without a shred of arrogance perhaps, would hear the birds singing to him and think, *'Good morning to you too, Mr. Bird'*. This man, *the* man, was many things. He was frustrating, charming, foolish and oftentimes a genius. He was not, however, simple. When the birds sang to him their *'Good mornings!'* became *'Good heavens! He's awake! Good heavens!'* His ears, of course, heard whistles. The man, as has been said though, did his listening with his heart. The ears hear and the heart understands. The birds knew this, too, so they whistled just for him.

The birds, in all their wisdom, were right to be shocked. Their repetition may be garish, but they say things twice because they know it all to be true. A bird's song in the morning is only monotonous to those who don't understand. He knew better than most how exclusionary the world was. Not everyone gets to experience things the way they were meant to be experienced. Luck was on his side the day he began to understand the birds and that saddened him. Others arose as early as he did that day, and for many of them it was not out of the ordinary. Still though, they went about their walks frustrated by the singing of their avian company. He shed a tear for this. If only they could know just how beautiful the song really was.

Early mornings were for more than the birds. The man tiptoed around the worms and carried on down the road. It was a miracle he arose early, yes. Perhaps needlessly early, although there really wasn't anybody who could've pre-empted such a thing. He was up, though, and he had a goal. A destination. Oftentimes, people try to understand the birds by doing nothing more than walking. Walking for fun is enticing at first. A real walker knows there

is no such thing, however. Somebody who *walks* understands that every journey has a purpose, especially those that begin without one. When he walked, the man often learned crucial things about what it meant to be him. This was not one of those walks. No, he awoke before the sun had risen because he had somewhere to be. The songs sung by those who sleep in the trees were bonuses, nothing more.

The road reached its end. Roads tend to connect to other places though, dead ends are not as common as you'd expect. People will tell you throughout your life that you need to be careful. They'll insist that it's important to make sure that you know where you're going, otherwise you'll hit a dead end and then there's no way forward. This is a falsehood purported by those who reach a dead end and decide that the only course of action is to turn around and go home. The man learned, many years ago, that most walls can be climbed over, most hurdles can be jumped. If you run to the end of a pier and there's nothing but ocean for as far as the eye can see, learn how to swim. Giving up is boring. Fail, absolutely. Fail as much as you can. Always keep going. It was this philosophy (as cliché as it may have been) that drove the man to turn and walk down the next road. Why wake up so early if you aren't going to commit to the day?

Commitment, the concept and the act, meant a lot to the man. It would to anyone who had lived the way he had. A life fraught with anxiety and loneliness rested behind him. Invitations were sparse and they were often unaccepted. He lived in fear of rejection. Torment and ridicule frightened the man far more than clowns and spiders ever could. The people who called the real world home had far more potential to harm him than any horrors he could conjure. One day, he asked for help. Courage seeped into

him like rain seeped into dirt to make mud. He was messy and tactless but the hand he reached out with was met by the hand of another. Since that day, he began to turn up. ‘Yes’ left his lips far more often than ‘no’ and he found happiness was waiting for him amidst the chaos of life. Fear once ruled him. In many ways it still did, only now – he followed through. He awoke beneath the cover of night and walked. He didn’t do this because he was no longer scared of what could be. The man had made a commitment. With every step he took, he made another.

The birds continued to sing to the man, if not louder than before, as the onslaught of rain had begun to dampen their song. Despite the man’s sudden transition from bone-dry to drenched, he continued to walk. Unless the rain had washed his destination away, which he doubted, he still had somewhere to be. His road turned into another, which turned into another. This cycle didn’t continue for long, though. He soon found himself trudging through the city’s longest stretch. The morning symphony no longer accompanied him, as he was in the belly of the beast. A town of young people surrounded the man. He could have been one of them. Alas, the path he walked had other plans for him. Celebration was no stranger to the man, but he had his limits. Wandering the streets empowered by the spirit of the previous night’s party was never in the cards for him. He walked everywhere he went and so his bed called for him sooner than his peers. This did not bother him, though. The drunken shouts of the town’s merry men spoke to him just the same as the birds. Obscenities became ‘*Good Mornings*’ when he listened with his heart. Perhaps harsher than the birdsong, but well-wishes, nonetheless.

He soon turned off the road of rowdy men, though, as the final stretch of his increasingly wet walk demanded solitude. The

birds had returned, although hearing their song only served to reinforce that he was alone. His avian orchestra was never a flock of one. Each bird had their partner, and each had sung together. Their dedication to existing in tandem inspired introspection that the man had never experienced.

Commitment. It had become a huge part of his life out of the blue, almost. The man lived alone for a long time, even when he was surrounded by those he should've cherished. His grasp on life was brittle, as if a single bad day could cut him off from the world forever. It almost did. An evening spent looking off the side of a bridge, wondering if it was high enough. It turned out though, as it always did, that he could not commit to that. Those choices, as final as they were, could never be made with ease. He continued his walk up a winding road, one surrounded by fancy houses and a myriad of trees. The branches sheltered him from the rain to a degree, although the shelter was pointless. Less rain wouldn't make him drier; the world didn't work like that. Less noise would never have made it quiet.

The man often considered the fact that life could have just been a dream. It could have been so chaotic because that's how dreams work. A barrage of disjointed nonsense thrown together that seems normal only because he knew nothing else. He thought that the end might have just meant it was time to wake up. *Thought* being the operative word though, as he wasn't that man anymore. A long walk to the place he needed to be reminded him of similar journeys, but he was certain that this adventure was different. The man he once was could never have woken at this time, especially not in the name of commitment. Grand houses surrounded him, houses that cost more money than he had ever seen in his life put together. Before, he would've seen them and thought nothing

more. They existed in a different reality to him. Now, he sees what could be. Such grandeur rests before him and he wonders if one day, it could be his. The man who went to the bridge could never have hoped in such a way.

At last, the man was done with roads. The birds ceased their song and positioned themselves on the trees, eager to watch his story continue. He had arrived at his destination. A house, posh like the others, but not his. Not yet. He knocked. Moments passed, no answer. One moment more, though, and the door creaked open.

‘What are you doing here? The sun isn’t even up yet.’ his mother asked.

The man laughed and walked into the house, eager to remove his soaked clothes. He had an outfit picked out, thankfully, and it was waiting for him.

‘It’s my wedding day. I didn’t want to be late.’

**Like stars to the sky,
we decorate our environment
with words,
our experiences,
and our observations.**

**Like a constellation,
we are grouped by our
passion for writing.**

CONSTELLATIONS

IS AN ANTHOLOGY OF PROSE OF MANY GENRES, POETRY, CREATIVE NON-FICTION AND SCRIPT,

COLLATED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF LINCOLN'S BA CREATIVE WRITING CLASS OF 2026.

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