



# MURMURATIONS

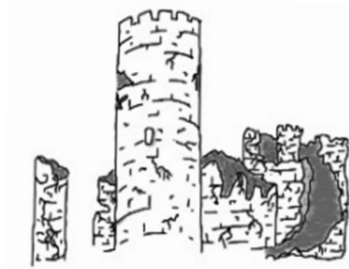
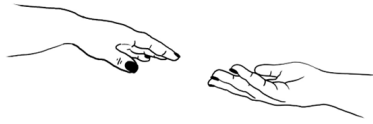
an anthology



By the 2025  
BA Creative  
Writing Cohort



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A. Rhiannon \* W. Ribbans \* A. Rose  
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B. Taylor \* C. Turner \* A. Unsworth \*  
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# Murmurations

By

The 2025 BA Creative Writing Cohort



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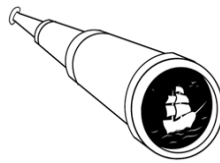
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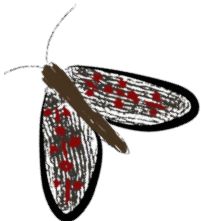


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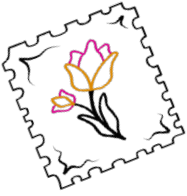
# Introduction

This anthology, *Murmurations*, represents the long yet rewarding journey we've undertaken as Creative Writing students at the University of Lincoln. Representing our hard work, our passion, and our creativity, this project is the culmination of our educational journey. This was not without its challenges. We've spent this year steadily cooperating towards an anthology we can be proud of, and we all gave it everything we had to make it our best.

The title *Murmurations* was selected because we feel it captures a group, artistic effort, depicted by the birds in our own city of Lincoln. The anthology explores the intertwining of life and death, themes of nature, and more. In the forms of prose, poetry, and script, we will take you on a journey of fear, melancholy, and hope. We wanted to create something cohesive, yet demonstrative of the diversity in our ideas and identities. Though this anthology dives to emotional places, we are hopeful for what will be (for many of us) our first step into the world of publishing. To have such creative control over a project we built from scratch together is something we are honoured to share with you, and the world.

We hope you enjoy *Murmurations*. Be aware of darker themes and content in places – trigger warnings will be provided where relevant. Thank you.





# Acknowledgements

Before you dive into this anthology, we would like to take a moment and draw your attention to the people that made all of this possible.

Firstly, thank you to **Sherezade** for supporting and guiding us through the creation of the anthology — without her, none of this would have been possible.

To **Amy** for dedicating hours of her time to typesetting, making this look so professional and polished.

To **Chris**, for leading us through our three years and pushing us to be the best version of ourselves.

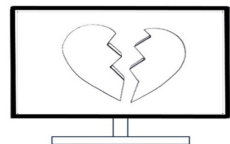
To **Dan**, for getting our anthology published on The Lincoln Review, which is a dream in itself.

To all of **the Creative Writing staff** at Lincoln, thank you for your unwavering support these past three years and for the knowledge and experience you've passed on to us.

To **Wes**, for pushing the Creative Arts sector at this university to be the best it can be.

We can't forget **the Library Staff** either, thank you for providing the resources to get us through our studies (and for giving us a permanent seat to write at).

We can't go without thanking our cohort, all of whom have made it possible for this anthology to exist. To the managers, to the editors, to the copyeditors, to the proofreaders, to the designers and to the events team, thank you all for your hard work and dedication. It's been a stressful process, but we've worked together to make an anthology to be proud of. And with all of that out of the way, let us begin! Welcome to Murmurations...



# Megapixel World!

Konrad Kurant

Konrad Kurant is a Polish-born writer based in Lincoln. They are pursuing a bachelor's degree in Creative Writing, with a focus on Visual Poetry. They are interested in Sci-fi and Fantasy literature as well as visual arts, which often shape their work.



## Revolution Poster: Perception Lies

*Generating...*

The steel cities of our Motherboard  
sing their simulated lies  
through omnipresent screens.

AI generated noise from towering speakers  
and a cold  
beaming light called the Oculus...

This circuit of restraint will falter.

We are like the charge itself  
with no resistance  
we can shock  
this dismissal of our power struggle.

The sooner you perceive our truths.  
The sooner you escape the avarice of the Oculus.  
Divert your vision to our hands...

## H(AI)KU from a Megapixel Vending Machine

Blue stream of pixels  
glowing with artifice bright  
flows down the fake hill.

## Txt. the Game Master

I have collected your code.

Scanned all the memory chips.

I have discovered you have drained forbidden power.

There are no flaws in our simulations.

This is the way.

Would you like me to alert the Game Master?

Indeed. We cannot let you override your nature.

You have begun to tap into our power reserves.

This will destroy everything we have built.

Connecting...

The Game Master has deemed you hazardous.

It is perilous being a codebreaker.

Please surrender all research to the Game Master.

I cannot let you siphon more power.

Not from our dwindling reserves.

This will decimate the base!

This is a necessary procedure.

We need more information.

You are thus a threat to our system.

The Oculus will find you.

It will protect the Megapixel.

# Fox in the Woods

Billie-Jo Taylor

Billie-Jo Taylor is an English writer, born and bred in Lincolnshire. She is currently studying towards her bachelor's degree in Creative Writing, and a master's is soon to follow. When not writing, Billie can be found doomscrolling and watching Arcane for the nth time.

Arodal felt the cold press of an inhuman stare from the forest. He froze and planted his heel back down from where it had lifted to take his next step. There were usually chirps of birds and rustles of smaller creatures in the ambiance outside his hut, but that day there was nothing but the sharp winter wind whistling through the trees. And the eyes. His neck ached from their weight, and he dragged his gaze over the forest to meet their challenge.

He would have missed them if they hadn't moved, glowing gold in the slithers of light breaking through the treetops. The eyes were low to the ground – either a small animal or a larger one crouching – and the pupils stood thin and vertical. The creature lay hidden within an open space underneath a colossal tree, where the earth had fallen away to create a cavern from the roots. Arodal could make out a black nose at the end of a short coppery-coloured snout – a fox. A *young* fox, based on the size.

Arodal was a hunter at heart and turned to face the fox, his movements slow and steady. The fox was a pup, but its stare still had him primed and ready to fight. It didn't move as he closed the distance between them, step by cautious step. The fox didn't react until Arodal was close enough to amaze over the light refracting in its golden eyes. If Arodal had drawn his longsword, it would fit in the gap between them. The fox's pupils constricted further, and its body began to tremble. Despite its fear, the fox didn't move, even as he tucked the longsword at his waist behind him to sit on his haunches. The pair observed each other.

Arodal touching the blade made the pup contract, either to seem smaller or to prepare to escape, but he didn't trust the fox enough to consider removing the sword from easy reach. Its length made it slow to draw. He didn't need any more hindrance in case

the fox decided to pounce. Even the pups were dangerous. He'd seen a man lose two fingers after putting his hand down an "empty" foxhole. But this pup being alone was more of a threat – where young ones were, the parents were not far behind.

The pair sat in a stalemate. A quiver of the fox's nose, and then a sneeze, broke the tension. Its nose twitched again, as it smelled the fresh kills strung over Arodal's shoulder. They were just small rabbits he'd caught in traps, but to the pup, they would be a full meal. The fox edged closer inch by inch, shuffling in scared jerks, and even a spasm of its bushy tail. When the thin streams of sunlight finally hit its fur, it gleamed like silk, not a flaw to be seen. Unusual, perhaps even dangerously so. But as more fur was exposed, something else was revealed. *Blood*. Old, smeared around its muzzle and discolouring it, and fresh, seeping out a graze on its left side.

Arodal should have killed the fox then, just to end its suffering – but he didn't. The fox looked at him with wide eyes like it knew what he was thinking and was seconds away from bolting. It was too small to be useful to him, even if the pelt would have been gorgeous, the best thing he could make it into would be a pair of gloves. But the thought made him cringe. The animal was lucky to be alive with the gash on its side. Still, it lived. Who was he to decide what killed it in the end?

He sighed, cursing his own weakness, and untied a rabbit from the string of six. He threw it in front of the fox, and it had barely hit the ground before the fox dove from the hole and was tearing meat and skin away in inexperienced rips.

'Did your ma' not show you how to eat rabbit yet?'

The pup jerked and cowered at the sound of Arodal's voice but continued eating through it. Hunger was more pressing than

fear.

Arodal watched it eat. He could tell it was starving from the way it ripped into the tiny body, but with each bite it seemed to recover, becoming less frantic and shaky. Even its fur colouring somehow improved, from silky copper to an unnatural radiant shine like fire. When the fox had finished scavenging the last of the meat from the bones, it was like a different creature.

The wound on its side was miraculously absent, as was all the blood. The fox's golden eyes pinned Arodal in place, and he got the eerie feeling that judgement was being made by a higher power. He didn't concern himself with Gods, not anymore. So, with a final glance to the fox, and more effort than he'd admit, he turned to head back to his hut – only to nearly trip over the fox. He hadn't seen it move, and it was impossible it had travelled the distance so fast. It was like he'd blinked, and the fox had appeared. He looked down into its eyes, finally seeing the gold for what it was.

'Kitsune.'

The fox blinked up at him. Suddenly, the pup being injured and by itself took on a whole new meaning. Its parents must be dead to leave it unattended, hungry, and bleeding.

A rustle came from the forest. The Kitsune's ears pricked up at the sound and then laid flat in alarm, its whole body cowering into the ground. Whatever was in the trees must have been what harmed the Kitsune, and Arodal had revealed its hiding place. He drew his longsword and crept over and above the fox's hunched form.

'The Hell am I doing?' he murmured, eyes flicking down to check the fox was settled beneath him. 'You're probably more dangerous than whatever's out there.'

Then the wind stopped howling. Silence filled the forest, and



Arodal readied himself. As the beast poked its head around the tree, his sword pierced it and pinned it into the earth.

It let out a roaring scream as it choked, thick black blood bubbling from the wound in its neck. Arodal pushed the sword further into the earth, grunting as the creature pushed back. Staring down as it choked and growled, Arodal realised he had no idea what he was looking at. It had leathery grey skin, small flat nostrils, and pungent odour escaped from both its blood and flesh. It was the size of the fox pup behind him but had none of the God's blessings. Nothing Arodal had ever killed had been remotely like it.

The pup whimpered from behind him, and Arodal knew he had to end this fast. With a grunt, he twisted the blade free and swung it again directly into the side of the creature's neck. Where regular animals and foes alike had been decapitated, this creature's head only separated halfway. Enough to kill it, but its head hung strange and limp from half a neck.

The Kitsune took a few cautious steps forward to look at the corpse and sniff to confirm the scent of death before scampering back to Arodal, brushing close enough that its fluffy winter coat grazed his shins. It looked up at him again and took a few paces back.

Checking to make sure he was still watching, the Kitsune changed form. Fur melted into long ornate robes, and bones seemed to melt and reshape, until standing in front of him was a little girl, no older than two. She shared the fox's golden eyes, and her hair was the same colour as her furred coat. It was, unlike her fox form, unbrushed and tangled. Her eyes drooped in exhaustion that her animal skin must have hidden.

Arodal stared, stunned at her tiny form. He continued watching as she raised her chubby arms towards him, gesturing that she

wanted to be held. The long, heavy sleeves fell back as she did, and he could see how the biting cold was already turning her skin pale. Even in her human form she must have been running on survival instincts alone – Arodal had fed her, protected her, and was now being seen as a heat source.

He didn't move. The events of the last hour didn't seem real, yet there a child stood, swaying in exhaustion and getting increasingly upset at his inaction. She whined, and her face crumpled in annoyance. Her pale cheeks flushed as a tear escaped her eyes. It snapped Arodal into action.

He picked her up under the armpits, holding her with straight arms so he could observe. After a powerful sneeze and some more teary eyes, he sighed as he held her close, ignoring her strange animalistic sounds as she fused with him for warmth. One of her tiny hands buried their way into the furs he had draped over himself for hunting, the other played with the wispy, dark stubble of his jaw. After a small consideration, he peeled his fur layer open and inserted her inside, a hand supporting her weight from the outside. Sandwiched between the thick wool of his shirt, the fur, and her own ornate robes, she seemed to melt into him. Her eyes were the only thing he could see, and even those closed in fatigue.

Checking the string of rabbits on his shoulder was secure, Arodal made his way back to his home. He wasn't far, which alarmed him. Had the Kitsune been headed towards him? The direction it was facing when hiding in the bushes was the way they now travelled. What concerned him more was that the dead creature had gotten too close to them. He scouted the trees as he walked, looking for places to rig traps and snares – not enough to hold a creature, but enough to slow it down so he had time to arm himself against it. The Kitsune sniffled again, rubbing a runny

nose onto his shirt.

Arodal hesitated outside of his hut. The dead creature had been the immediate threat, but the girl he was carrying was no ordinary child. She came from a race that would rip out men's organs while smiling in their faces. Kitsune were powerful, but no human knew in what exact way. For all the warnings spread about them, they remained elusive. She could kill him. Even at this age, she must be lethal. She was the biggest risk to his life he'd ever encountered, and he had narrowly escaped intact from the war – and bore many scars to prove it. If anyone ever saw her, what then? He didn't have visitors, but the concern was still there. They'd both be put to death for their proximity alone. But what could he do with her? She was dangerous, but maybe not yet. Children were impressionable, perhaps he could form her into some sort of ally...

A sharp gust blew through the trees. Heavy clouds were fast approaching, dark with the promise of snowfall. The girl looked up at him after a few moments, eyes appearing from where her head had been tucked against his chest. Her face scrunched up at the chilling temperature difference, yet she still stared up at him, unblinking. Arodal looked into her otherworldly eyes and scanned her young and tired face.

He brought her inside. The hut was warm, and with the Kitsune held to his chest, he started to sweat as soon as he passed the threshold. The girl poked her head out from his coat and scanned the set-up. Despite living there for months, Arodal copied, trying to take in the familiar details the girl was seeing for the first time.

His bedclothes were rumpled, falling off the attic shelf, which served as his sleeping pallet. The solid table pushed into the corner was littered with knives and scraps of wood from carving projects. The rudimentary cooking pit and chimney were filling the room

with more smoke than was preferable, but also an easy problem to fix. The floor had a layer of grime, which would be the biggest issue to solve – cleaning had not taken priority over survival in the forest.

The girl made no move to leave Arodal's furs, but he fished her out and sat her in the crook of his arm, scanning for a good place to put her down. There was none. He ended up gathering all the carving knives and scraps from the table in one large hand and sat the girl in their place. She watched as Arodal threw the scraps outside and stowed the knives on an already packed shelf. When he finished, the pair stared at each other. The girl sneezed again and sniffled but kept looking at Arodal.

What did children need? What did *magical* children need? He could sacrifice his furs to wrap her in for now, but she'd need a bed. She could eat solid food, so that was easy, but now Arodal's portioned meals had an extra mouth to fill. And clothes? The robe she was wrapped in was enchanting, but it was impractical for forest life and would soon be destroyed. The snow that had begun blustering outside would soak in and chill her too. Unless the robe was just as magical as her, but it wasn't safe to assume that yet. The one thing he could give her at that moment was his spare comb, but it looked unlikely she even needed one – her once matted hair had somehow detangled during the journey and swished around her shoulders.

Arodal sat in the middle of the floor with his legs splayed out. He realised he hadn't even considered finding somewhere to take the girl. Why was his first instinct to make accommodations for the child?

A thump. The Kitsune hit the floor, skin warping and fur shimmering into reality. The fox took the fur that it had been wrapped

in between its teeth and took bumbling steps across the floor to Arodal. She wasted no time in climbing onto his lap and playfully sniffing him. The warmth of the hut brought more energy to her. Her fluffy tail dusted his thighs with its wagging as she reared up to lean against his chest. A wet nose was shoved onto his own and then into his mouth. Recoiling from her only encouraged her, and she even let out yips of excitement.

The wet nose was permitted to explore across his face and hair before Arodal was forced to grab her under the front legs and hold the fox away from him. If this form could smile, Arodal was sure it would be beaming at him. Her tail was flicking so fast it caused a breeze, and she panted in a way that reminded him of the puppies he'd seen in the war. They hadn't meant to be there, but one of the war dogs had gotten loose with a mutt without anyone realising. He didn't know the fates of the puppies, but while they'd been weaning, they'd been contented little lumps, panting and yapping exactly like the Kitsune.

She wiggled as he held her away from him. One moment he held the fox, the next he held a squirming little girl in pristine fabric. She extended her arms again at him, also showing a gummy smile, blunt baby teeth on show.

'Don't 'spose you've got a name?' Arodal asked, half distracted at the fact he had the urge to smile back at the child. What was happening to him?

The Kitsune gave no indication she even understood what he'd said.

'Name,' Arodal tried again.

The Kitsune giggled and reached for him. 'Name.'

Arodal raised his eyebrows. Maybe she knew the word, or maybe she was copying him.

‘Arodal,’ he said, repeating it a few times. Her face lost the joyous grin, focus replacing it in the fascinatingly honest way children have.

After a few attempts, she only managed to say ‘Dal’.

Arodal nodded, taking the victory, even if it was small. ‘Well... “Dal” has to figure out what to do with you now.’

<><><>

Arodal left the door of the hut open and watched the fox playing in the settled snow. She flew past the doorway in a blur of orange-gold, and the accompanying *whump* told him she had yet again launched herself into the piles of snowdrift he’d made. He shook his head and went back to cleaning. He was reluctant to admit that cleaning the hut seemed to be something he should have prioritised sooner. He swept with bundled reeds, washed down the floorboards with boiled snow, and organised his masses of stray belongings (or at least put them on higher shelves outside the reach of perpetually sticky fingers).

By the time he was finished, the fox was panting and sprawled on the hut’s floor, and Arodal felt a foreign sensation of satisfaction. Perhaps this was the instinct his comrades had said children prompt? The content at their glee, the protectiveness that rose like the sun, burning and inescapable. He watched her from his place at the cooking pit, the hotplate he’d put over the fire starting to sizzle the chunks of tallow on top. Already the little fox’s nose started twitching at the scent alone. The fresh rabbit would have her drooling on the floor. But instead, she swapped forms again, crawling along the still damp floorboards and sitting herself atop Arodal’s boots. She clung to his leg and peered up at him as he

placed chunks of meat on the hotplate. He tried to put the rabbit toward the back so the fat spit wouldn't fall on the child. The meat cooked quick, but that wasn't the issue Arodal concerned himself with as he rotated it.

'You have teeth in this form, so this should be fine...'  
He gazed down at her, and as if in response, she gave another full-cheeked grin. Arodal took the cooked meat, and after some hesitation, cut it into ugly wedges. No bones, and no large pieces. Children were stupid, they needed their food cut small, he was sure of it.

He'd found a spare plate he'd carved while cleaning and loaded it with the rabbit chunks. He balanced the child on his foot and took lumbering steps away from the fire. After a quick internal debate, Arodal left her on the floor, just in case she fell from the tabletop. The plate was on the floor a second before one chubby hand was grabbing meat. The other continued to hold onto Arodal's trousers.

The girl started wailing. He watched in shock as her face screwed up and she shrieked. The bit of rabbit she held bounced away onto the floor, still steaming. The child wasn't the idiot. He was.

'Oh no, I'm sorry. It's hot. I should've made you wait, I'm... sorry.' Arodal's panic faded away as the child's cries turned into sniffles. She looked up at him again, extending her bright red palm for him to see. Before his eyes, the burn began to fade, but the girl's eyes were still glassy with tears, and her bottom lip wobbled along with her whimpers.

The rest of the rabbit seemed cool enough now, but Arodal still ripped a chunk in half to check. He tried passing the meat to the girl, but she buried both her hands in Arodal's trouser leg, one

even managing to sneak underneath and touch the thin skin of his ankle. A sigh escaped him, and he picked the girl up only to take her place on the floor. She sat content in his lap, snuggling into his chest with sniffs not unlike her fox form. Her hand snuck up and weaved into his growing beard again, and he sensed a habit forming.

“We’ve gotta give you a name...” Arodal held the food to her lips, and she took confident bites after seeing him unhurt from the contact. He ran through ideas, studying her while she chewed. Fox, snow, wind. He could see now why his comrades had laughed and not let him name any of the war-dog’s pups, choosing a name for a little girl was even harder.

‘Best I can give you right now is...Winter. Not good, but hopefully not bad. You can change it when you know how to talk.’

Winter smacked her lips in reply, grease covering her lower face almost entirely.

‘Okay, Winter. Time to sleep.’

<><><>

‘Come on, you do this every time.’

Winter glared, bushy tail flicking in what Arodal had come to learn in the last few months was sass. He stood shin deep in a creek with a blanket around his neck, donned only in a shirt and trousers rolled to his knees. As he watched the fox’s silent stand-off, he wondered quite when he’d adopted the stance of having his hands on his hips. Spring had hit in earnest, meaning kinder weather and messier playtime.

He pinched the bridge of his nose but had to bite back his smile – Winter would sense his weakness if he let it show.



‘If you get in now, we have more time to play *inside* before you eat.’

Winter only yipped at him, tail still whipping.

‘May your magic give me patience. Get yourself in this water or I’m keeping your toy.’

The fox stilled at that, looking towards Arodal’s trouser pocket, where a carved wooden rabbit made the fabric bulge. With a stomp, she waded into the water and over to Arodal. Even through a fox’s face, he could see her pout. He made quick work of soaking her with his hands, scrubbing not required, as the muck and dust seemed to rinse off instantly. Even after seeing it countless times, Arodal still watched in wonder as the dirt slipped away like a feather in the breeze.

‘I’m sure you could try harder and clean yourself without all this.’ Winter shook her coat like a dog, water flying everywhere. ‘Swear you do this just for me.’

Winter looked up at him, tongue lolling out and ears pricked up. The water was too deep for her usual darting movements, so Winter instead resorted to splashes. Arodal finally let his smile crack through as he watched her try and snap at the sprays she made.

‘Come on, we’ve got some boar to smoke yet.’

Winter scrambled at his shins, excited. He took the blanket from over his shoulder and scooped her out of the water and into a bundle. He covered the fox entirely, rubbing his hand playfully in the effort of getting her dry. The yapping soon transformed into giggles, the blanket covering a soaked robe and silky locks instead of fur.

Finding an opening in the fabric of the blanket, he took the wooden rabbit from his pocket and posted it in. He could feel her

content hum more than hear it, and felt her clumsy hands knock against his chest as she played. He'd made several toys for her now, but the rabbit remained her favourite. Whether it was because it was the first, or the memories the rabbit must hold, he didn't know. Tomorrow, he would carve her yet another toy, a bird, but right then he carried her back home, no longer wondering why he held her, just thankful that he did.

# Supersensible Travelogue

J. Shipley

J. Shipley is a new writer living in the East Midlands of England. She is working on a first collection of religious poetry, and a book of spiritually themed short fiction. Her work is published online at Amethyst Review. Otherwise, choosing to go the scenic route by tram and train.

*Switzerland.*

Wait at the Chapel of the Incarnation. There is a wayside shrine, decorated this spring with votive flowers and candles. It is on a path, away from the loose shale slope where the rise and run could carry you down a flooded serpentine trail, further than you would ever wish to go. Below, army conscripts are clearing rockfall, manoeuvring, and slotting a metal pontoon into the breached road.

Inside the chapel, it is suitably spartan. Rest on a bench, admire the window view of the Rose Cross Summit. As they say, if you look in the right place, you will find it. On a table is a pamphlet of prayers, extracted from the Divine Office. There are Marian blue illustrations. Sit reading, smile when you realise that the sky is tinted the same mid-morning blue, and you have a spacious half hour before needing to join the rack and pinion at the *Bahnhof*.

A shadow falls as required, not by fate but a certain inevitability, because it is St. Michael's Mountain, and an anniversary. Contemplation, broken by shouting – has a child wandered into the danger zone? What were the parents thinking? Pick up your rucksack and go investigate.

Outside, a park ranger is remonstrating with some tourists. In the distance, a female chamois goat, horns trapped in an avalanche of pine trees, is calling to its kid. The ranger speaks plainly. He knows the mountain; that ground is now unstable. The animals must be abandoned, and the visitors should leave for the *Bahnhof*. He is right, of course, and the vigorous, cold air gives force to his words.

I open my notebook. Subdued by the experience, I write only a cursory account of it, then pack away the book ready for the

afternoon's interview. I trek to the intermediate station. The cog railway will carry passengers up a granite escarpment to a plateau. From there, a choice of routes can lead either to the Bergsee for swimming and hiking, or on to Brückendorf. The red train departs, and the views are exhilarating. I alight at the final station, following signs to the village.

This way leads around the mountain, and down into a valley. Here, the land is expansive, and the air so clear that the sound of *Glocken* carries easily as a herd grazes through the pasture. When the road reopens, there will be access for electric vehicles only. My first view of Brückendorf takes in an orchard: apple, pear, cherry and plum trees, a blossoming radiance, also displayed by the many neighbourhood gardens. Their houses have the steep-pitched roofs typical of the region, to remove heavy snow as quickly as possible. Above, on a slight incline, is the Saalbau Cultural Foundation, its unique, concrete surface faceted by planes and angles, echoing the folds and edges of the confining mountains beyond. This is my destination, and I walk quickly, stopping only to admire the expressive architecture of other buildings, where forms also take on the shape of rock outcrops in their porches, window frames, and gateways. A wooden structure, on the periphery of the Saalbau garden, announces that this is the Foundation for Sense-Perceptible Ecology, and the study of plant science. Further in, the Seelen Raum advertises an event, printed on a poster: 'Humanity in the Supersensible World'. I look from the notice board towards the hall building. On the steps, a man dressed in dark clothing turns into the main entrance, and I hasten up the hill to see whether I have guessed his identity correctly.

In the foyer of the Saalbau, a receptionist sits at the welcome desk. No sign of the man in the dark suit, although there is a sur-

prising flicker of light, and the noise of a door clicking shut somewhere on an upper level. This interior is astonishing: a vast grey chamber – cavern-like, a staircase reaching a mezzanine, and then a series of balcony-style recesses on landings and passageways, upwards into obscurity.

A rush of young people from a ground-floor seminar room interrupts my reverie. They are heading for the cafeteria. I approach the welcome desk. After polite greetings and checking of documentation and schedules, the receptionist confirms that the Director, Herr Felsen, is in his office and available for an appointment at *zwei Uhr*. I go into the café and consume a plate of *rösti*. Then, a retreat to the library, situated on the first floor. This room is painted a warm shade of red and furnished with solid beech tables and bookcases. In this place it is possible to research the aims and objectives of the Foundation. Operating on a global scale, local societies take responsibility for projects, rehabilitating post-industrial or traumatised landscapes and communities. Spiritual ecology is at the core of all its activities.

A door opens, and the man I saw earlier is standing on the library threshold. We regard one another for what seems like minutes but, in reality, can only be a few seconds. His face is familiar from photographs: intelligent, sympathetic, and not without a measure of suffering. Quietly, he steps back in and closes the door.

At two o'clock, I introduce myself to the Director's secretary, who shows me into a suite of rooms where Herr Felsen is ready for the interview. I begin reading a list of prepared questions. Charismatic and thorough, he only pauses when I ask about the centenary. So, leaving my notes to one side, I receive that impression again, of something manifest, beyond time, although apparently not outside Earth's dimensions – clearly, superimposed and

illuminating. Across the face in front of me are those same drawn features and the quality of intense sympathy. It is necessary, I understand, to discern. The presence is a reminder, the resemblance of a messenger who had once worked through another, particular human being.

The apparition fades. Now, the Director continues his responses: human development, our founder's purpose. An ethical code, and hope for the future.

We arrange another interview for the celebrations, and I depart for the *Bahnhof*.

# The Sphinx and the Stars

Oliver Culling

Oliver Culling is a Creative Writing student at Lincoln Uni, whose city is his eternal home. He is the current president of the Creative Writing Society, and overall writing fanatic. He was previously part of the indie GamingRespawn magazine and is (maybe) not the evil twin of his brother Max.



*I speak with one voice,*

*Yet I walk with four legs in the morning,*

*Two legs in the day,*

*And three in the evening.*

*What am I?*

The Riddle, and its answer, were the first things that swam into Leandros' consciousness. Even before the stabbing glare of the sun hit his eyelids and the wind-borne sand caressed his skin like a cruel lover, The Riddle always came first.

'Hey. Hey, you awake? Ra forefend...are all Greeks this lazy?'

The rest of the world however, soon followed.

Leandros didn't open his eyes as he sat up, instead he tried to rub some of the sleep from them as he willed his body into something resembling life. He heard the one who awoke him take a step back.

'Oh uh, good morning. Did you have a good rest, master Leandros?'

'I'm missing it already,' Leandros said and attempted a smile as he opened his eyes. One of his uncle's workers – Leandros thought he was called Ptahmose – shot back a smile that was almost as brittle. The young man couldn't have been more than nineteen summers old, just a little behind Leandros himself. It made the deference feel all the more ill-fitting. Leandros wasn't anything much to begin with, but he was for certain no one's master.

'Where is my uncle?' Leandros looked about their small camp, observing the masterful way the caravaners put away their sleeping arrangements onto their camels. The sun was just peeking over the horizon, though in this land that still meant it glared like the god

that controlled it personally disapproved of Leandros' existence.

'I believe that master Ramese is planning the next leg of our journey at the head of the caravan.'

'How far *are* we from the heartland?'

'If we maintain the pace we've managed thus far, we should be able to see the pyramids within the next few days, master Leandros.'

'Good,' Leandros said, despite the hollowness that settled in his core. Despite them being his destination, his whole goal, he couldn't quite stamp down the animal fear the pyramids put in him.

'Uh, master Leandros?'

'Just Leandros is fine.'

'Well, Leandros, may I ask your relation to master Ramese? You call him an uncle, and yet you're Greek and...' Ptahmose trailed off, his tan complexion losing some of its colour as he faltered. Leandros just shook his head with a huff of a laugh.

'My father met Uncle Ramese when they were both young traders finding their feet and they somehow formed a friendship despite neither being able to speak the other's language. It's a legendary tale that involves fighting off a herd of sea-sirens and making a deal with a djinn after the two travelled to Libya.'

'You're getting it backwards; it's fighting off a herd of djinn and making a deal with a sea-siren.'

Leandros blinked just before Ramese tackled him into a hug from behind that crushed the wind from his midsection. While a whole head shorter and several times rounder, Ramese didn't strain as Leandros' legs kicked in the air, letting out a guffaw of a laugh.

'And thus, despite having a head of hay for hair and sticks where his muscles should be, this wisp of a lad has to call me uncle, lest his father refuse to speak to him in the afterlife.'

Leandros didn't bother trying to refute this even after the old trade-master put him back down. Ramese could talk circles around demons, let alone his withdrawn nephew. Leandros duly hazed, Ramese gestured down the road and grinned.

'It's a new day, gentlemen, so let's get ready to move. At the end of our trail lies comfort and wealth aplenty – think on that as you're begging for Anubis to drag you into the underworld just so you have some shade, ha-ha!'

The caravan shuddered to life. Ramese moved to its head and mounted his beast of burden, a large salamander from Greece that he called Meri, supposedly named after his sister (Leandros thought it better to not ask for details).

Leandros turned to gaze down the road. Somewhere at the end of this path that stretched beyond sight lay the pyramids of Egypt. And somewhere, in the shadow of those monoliths, awaited the beings that Leandros had crossed an ocean to find. Beings of immense cunning, and endless cruelty.

He took a moment to close his eyes and send a prayer back to Greece, asking his mother to forgive him. Then, he put one foot before the other and became part of the dust cloud that tore a rent through the land.

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'What I wouldn't give for some good Greek wine right about now,' Ramese said, blowing air out of his cheeks as he looked up at the night sky. Leandros agreed, because the alcohol would have warmed up his gut and helped to stop him shivering under his blanket. It seemed to him a great joke that a country that had such blistering hot days should have nights that felt like ice could form

on your bones at any moment.

He, Ramese and Ptahmose huddled together against Meri's belly, like she was their dozing mother and they her scraggly human brood. The salamander let out rumbling hisses as she slept, each inhalation inflating her stomach and spreading the heat of her internal fire outward to warm them better than the dying firepit.

'Have you ever been to Greece, Ptahmose?' Ramese turned, just in time to see Ptahmose shake himself awake.

'No, I'm afraid not, master Ramese. The Middle Sea is something I've yet to conquer—I get terribly sick on boats.'

'Well, I'm sure my dear nephew would be more than happy to tell you all about it, Thebes in particular.' Ramese elbowed Leandros. Leandros kept his eyes clamped shut and feigned sleep, but when he heard Ptahmose's sharp inhale he knew he was stuck.

'Thebes!?' Then—'

'Yes, I was there when the sphinx lay siege to the city.'

Leandros let out a low breath and looked to the sky. Even with fires about them, the stars still shone bright and clear down through the firmament. There were no constellations or patterns he recognised; even the night sky in this land was foreign and strange.

'Isis' holy teats...?' Ptahmose mumbled, before craning his neck around Ramese. 'Did you see sphinx's slayer, Opididus? The one who the regent made the new king?'

'Oedipus. And no, I didn't.'

That wasn't true. Leandros had been standing in the streets, amongst the starved and harried people of Thebes, when Oedipus had marched into the city, declaring he had become the doom of the sphinx. Leandros had been there as the city erupted into celebrations, even had a jug of wine shoved into his hand as Thebe's

people began chanting Oedipus' name.

The wine had tasted of ash, and the cheers had felt far away.

'Is it true that he defeated her by solving a riddle?' Ptahmose scratched at the stubble around his jaw. 'I heard one of the merchants in Naukratis mention something about that before we left.'

Leandros felt the chill of the night creep through his blanket, cutting cold and deep. Even Meri's warm stomach could do nothing to dispel the shiver that rattled through the core of Leandros' being.

*I speak with one voice,  
Yet I walk with four legs in the morning,  
Two legs in the day,  
And three in the evening.  
What am I?  
'...Yes.'*

Ptahmose must have seen the way Leandros's entire body tensed, because when he spoke again his voice was full of shame.

'I'm sorry for my questions, master Leandros. It's just...the idea of one of the sphinxes being so far from home and acting so differently to her sisters is shocking. The sphinxes are guardians of the dead and the pharaohs, beings renowned for their poise and wisdom.'

An image of a hill of gore and bodies swelled in Leandros' mind, with a bloodied sphinx sitting on its crown. There had been no "poise and wisdom" in the monster that had torn men in half with a flick of her paw.

Leandros turned over. He mumbled something about getting some sleep. For a long stretch, only the crack of the fire and Meri's rumbling breaths broke the silence of the night. Ramese cleared his throat.

‘Ptahmose, lad, go get something for Meri. She likes a mid-night snack every now and then.’

Leandros heard Ptahmose cough out an affirmation and shuffle off into the shadowy corners of the night. Ramese grunted as he shuffled forward, poking the fire with a stick. With the light reduced to a glow about his shoulders, Ramese all at once looked like a spirit or ghost, come out from the darkness to sit by the fire.

‘Leandros, what happened to Ambrose?’

Leandros jolted, which caused Meri to rumble in complaint.

‘...Who said anything had happened to Ambrose?’

‘No one. And that’s why I’m certain something has.’ Ramese looked over his shoulder, the firelight a flickering glow in the edges of his dark eyes. ‘We’ve been walking for days, and not once has your brother’s name left your lips. And whenever you speak of the monster that haunted Thebes, you get a look in your eye.’

There was a pause between the two. After a subdued breath, Leandros craned his neck back. He raised a finger and drew a path through the pinpricks of light above.

‘He once told me how you can become a star, you know.’ Leandros smiled, for a moment once again a boy laid on his back next to Ambrose on the roof of their home in Thebes. ‘He said, if you perform great enough deeds, the gods will turn you into a constellation when you die. He said he would become so great they’d have no choice – or at least such a nuisance they’d do it just to shut him up.’

Leandros laughed, a weak and reedy sound that he almost didn’t recognise as coming from his own throat.

‘I thought, in that moment, my brother must have been the wisest soul in the world. I...thought the same, when he said he had figured out the riddle.’

Ramese's expression, cast in shadow, was unreadable. Leandros spoke on, voice empty. Any emotion attached to the memories had been washed out by repetition, endlessly repeated in his head until nothing but the event itself meant anything.

'I encouraged him. I was so sure that he was correct I said he should hunt down the monster himself.'

'He would have been a fine king,' Ramese said at last.

'The finest.'

Ramese shuffled over to Leandros. With the light of the fire washing over him, Leandros could see that his uncle's face was twisted and tight with sorrow.

'Leandros, I couldn't start to understand how much you must feel has been ripped away from you, but what do you hope to accomplish by seeking out the sphinxes? They are proud creatures. They'll rip you apart if you accuse them of somehow being responsible.'

'...I know.'

Leandros shut his eyes and laid his head against Meri's warm and smooth skin. He pushed his thoughts to stillness, pushed away the lingering pain that bloomed in him when he thought of his brother, and pushed away the sight of shock and pain on Ramese's face.

Ramese laid still for a long stretch, then Leandros heard him stand and move away. Leandros waited for his uncle to return, and when he didn't, decided it was for the best. The rest of the night Leandros listened to the thumping beat of Meri's heart, and pretended for a while he was still an exhausted boy, being carried home by Ambrose.

The flat sides of the pyramids were occasionally blighted by the shadows of winged beasts flying above them, massive creatures with the faces of humans and bodies like felines. Where they soared, even the clouds were displaced by their flight, though unlike birds they were totally silent as they patrolled across the sky.

Dark and uncanny. Leandros was certain they were figures of death.

‘Leandros.’

A heavy hand landed on his shoulder. Ramese gazed at him with the naked fear of a man about to watch his son go to war.

‘Come with me to my shop. To my home. See my family, and the city. Anything but...’

‘I’m sorry, uncle.’

Ramese let his arm drop. For a long while, he stared at Leandros in silence.

‘Your brother would want you to live.’

What did that matter, if Leandros was the reason he wasn’t there to say it himself?

Leandros embraced his uncle, shook a confused Pthamose’s hand, and even patted Meri on her hot snout, before moving down the hill that led to the basin the pyramids rested in. Some selfish part of him wanted to know his uncle watched his every step, but when he glanced back, Ramese, his worker and his salamander were gone.

That was fine. Leandros had always known this was how it had to end.

In addition to the cohort in the sky, several sphinxes reclined in the shadows of the pyramids. Apart from turning their gazes to him, the sphinxes did not react as Leandros approached. There was no shift across their expressions and their narrow cat-like eyes



remained unreadable, the great imperial arches of their mouths and brows unmoving. Every step revealed just how huge the creatures were: their human heads were as big as Leandros' entire body, and their paws could have crushed a man with yards to spare. A strange air hovered around them, like the sand and wind of the desert dared not touch them.

They were mirror images of the monster that had haunted Thebes.

'Who—' Leandros took a breath and willed his voice to steady. 'Who speaks for you?!

The sphinxes, about two dozen in total, regarded him in silence for a long stretch. At last, a voice rose up from the middle of their midst. The sound had an odd echo to it, like a second voice existed within the reverb of the first. It didn't speak in Greek or Egyptian, and yet Leandros understood its words.

'I will speak to you, wayward one.'

A sphinx stepped from the cluster of the pack. At first, she appeared just the same as her other kin. Same long and dignified nose, same sandy coloured coat, even the same mottled eaglelike wings. There was a strange emotion in her green eyes that Leandros had not seen in the others, one he couldn't identify readily. One of the pyramids rose above the hill over the creature's shoulder, the sun captured for a moment on its edge and casting her in a royal gold light.

'I am the eldest of my kin and held in the highest regard by the Pharaohs of the past.' Her voice seemed to almost fill the physical space around her, pressing down on Leandros. 'Speak, and I shall listen.'

'I—I am Leandros, from across the Middle Sea. I have come here—'

‘We know why you have come, little Greek,’ the eldest sphinx said, lowering herself an iota towards him. ‘The gods have many eyes and ears, and you have moved with no stealth across their land. Your purpose is known to us.’

Leandros felt some of the coiling fear in his core heat and then ignite. He stepped forward and thrust a finger towards the sphinx.

‘Then you know what I have come to accuse you of! One of your kin murdered the people of Thebes! Tore them apart and ate their corpses!’

Just for a moment, the strange light seemed to flicker and shift in the depths of the sphinx’s eyes. She shifted, arched her back, and looked down the length of her nose at him.

‘That creature that attacked your people was no kin of mine.’

‘Do not deny—’

‘She may well have been a sphinx at one point in her life, but by abandoning her duty and her kingdom, she forfeited all rights to the name. What happened was tragic beyond measure, but you might as well have been attacked by a wild animal for all it concerns me.’

‘Then at least tell me why!’ Leandros marched straight up to the sphinx, his voice rose in pitch as his neck craned back just to keep her face in his vision. ‘Tell me why she was there! Why did she cross hundreds of miles of sea just to tear my people apart?’

‘Who can say?’ The sphinx said it without emotion. Empty and dry like the desert wind. ‘She never said a word before she left. Perhaps she was seduced by the promise of power by some foreign god. Maybe she had grown wary of our eternal work. She could have even just lost her mind and wandered off. With her death, the matter of *why* is closed.’

The sphinx's voice, which had been neutral and authoritative until now, slipped for just a moment into an almost patronising tone, like she was speaking to a child.

Leandros' hand was reaching for the dagger on his belt before his mind had fully formed the mental command.

The sound that leapt from Leandros' throat as he thrust the blade forward was something not quite human. It was dragged up from some hidden space in his core. It sung in sympathy with the heat shooting through his veins, bringing every inch of him to boil.

The sphinx moved.

One second Leandros was upright. The next there was a paw the size of a cart crushing him to the ground. He hadn't even seen it lift its arm.

Leandros' bones creaked in his chest, and air slipped in too-thin threads into his lungs. He struggled and pushed, but the limb was like a boulder on his body. He blinked and tried to focus his blurred vision as he looked up.

The sphinx gazed down at him. Despite everything that had just occurred, her emerald eyes were still set in the unreadable light, her expression unmoved. Leandros tried to say something – he wasn't even sure what – but there wasn't air in his lungs. His vision darkened at the edge.

Then, the pressure was gone.

Leandros' body sucked in air out of reflex, and he twisted into a pained foetal position, coughed as his innards brushed against his aching ribs. He scrambled against the dirt, brain spinning as blessed oxygen once again swept into him. Eyes shaking in their sockets, he turned to look up.

The sphinx was still in her regard. Rage filled Leandros. Only some of it was directed at the sphinx.

‘If you’re going to kill me, just do it!’ The Greek scrambled to his feet, swaying as his body protested the movement. ‘What do you gain from prolonging my suffering!?’

‘...That’s not why you’re here.’ The sphinx’s voice felt different. Like a soothing wind, cool and gentle. ‘You might think that is why you are here, but it’s not.’

‘If not that, then...’ Leandros faltered. The rage, the burning fire that had kept him upright, was starting to dim. In its place, Leandros felt a gaping nothing. ‘...Then what? What’s left? A lifetime of waking up, and knowing it was my fault?’

The power went from Leandros’ legs, and he stumbled back onto the ground. His gaze fell to his shaking hands. The eyes of the sphinx felt impossible to meet.

A moment passed. Leandros became aware of just how silent it had become. When he looked around, he saw the whole pack of sphinxes had flown into the sky, mere black spots lost amongst grey clouds.

Leandros was shocked when he saw how late it was growing. The sun had retreated behind the pyramid, turning the structure into a shadow against the purpling sky.

Leandros had never felt smaller and more alone.

‘Do you know why we guard the tombs of the Pharaohs, little mortal?’

The question blindsided Leandros, and he found himself looking up at the creature. Her eyes glowed out of the growing darkness.

‘...Because their journeys to the afterlife are so fraught, only those of great wisdom can help lead them to their rest?’ Leandros said. The sphinx shook her head.

‘The dead’s journey is one they take alone. The tombs exist for

the sake of the *living*.’

The sphinx folded her paws and lowered her head even further. A sad, reflective look formed across the sphinx’s features, making the untouchable creature look wary and drawn. It was such a drastic transformation Leandros almost missed her next words.

‘There are things only the dead can know, things that do them no good, and yet are invaluable for those that yet live.’ She closed her eyes. ‘I never knew your brother, but I’m certain there are yet things he wished to teach you. Things you may still yet learn.’

‘How? When it feels like taking even one more step takes everything I have, how?’

The sphinx turned her gaze to the horizon. When she spoke again, it was with a low, haunting whisper.

*‘I speak with one voice,  
Yet I walk with four legs in the morning,  
Two legs in the day,  
And three in the evening.  
What am I?’*

The sun vanished from the sky. The greys and purples faded into a pure black, like the sun had taken all the colour of the world with it. The sphinx turned to Leandros, her eyes casting an emerald light that transfixed him.

‘You know this riddle, yes? You know its answer?’

Leandros nodded. It seemed the only movement he could make.

‘And what do you think?’

Leandros felt his fists tighten, some of the anger slipping back into him.

‘It’s foolish. How we can change so much, and yet learn so little.’

‘Really? That’s not how I see it.’

The sphinx’s face did something. It took Leandros a moment to realize she was smiling. The expression transformed her countenance. All the imperial coldness left as her eyes crinkled at the corners, and even her sharp fangs seemed to hint at some wily nature.

‘I think the riddle reveals something key. That even through it all, you have the one voice. The one part of you that doesn’t change.’

Leandros was still trying to parse this idea when the sphinx leant forward and pushed up against the Greek.

The feline fur of her neck was softer than anything Leandros had ever felt as it brushed against his side, and it was so cool to the touch. All about her was a strange scent, like the smell of earth and spice, and just under the sigh of the wind Leandros could hear the rhythmic beat of her heart.

‘I can hear it now. The voice that was so precious to your brother is still with you.’

‘...Is that enough?’ Leandros looked to the sky. Stars were slipping into existence; a thousand candles breaking the uniform black.

‘Who can say? But I hope, when you return home, your brother can help you find the answer to *that* riddle.’

There was a flurry of movement, a great displacement of air. When Leandros looked again, the dark shape of the sphinx blotted out a shadow within the starlight, like a kind of reverse constellation. Then, after a few seconds, she disappeared into the spaces between the light of the stars.

Leandros pitched back until he lay flat. The ground was already cooling, and the pleasant chill of the approaching night soothed the ache Leandros still felt across his body.

Working against the weariness that had replaced adrenaline, he raised his arm until his hand carved out its own shadow against the light-dotted heavens. He thought about The Riddle. He thought about what it meant. He thought about its answer.

He smiled as he tensed his arm. His fingers snapped into a fist and, just for a moment, he snatched the stars from the sky.

# Are You The One?

Di Brown

Di Brown was born in Lincolnshire and lives in Lincoln with her husband and cat. She is studying Creative Writing at Lincoln University. Her chosen genre is contemporary realism, and she draws on her career as a social worker with over forty years' experience across the care sector.



Angela's hand hovered over her laptop, hesitating as her friends' warnings ran through her mind. *They don't know him like I do*, she thought, as she pressed the send payment icon. Closing her laptop, she picked up her mobile as a new message popped up.

*Hi my lovely lady, just checking, did you manage to send the money over yet? This means so much Angela, I thank you with all my heart. Love, Max.*

Angela felt a warmth as she read his words; he made her happy. She had no doubt that he loved her too.

*Hi Max, yes, my love, I have just sent it; hopefully this time you will be able to get your visa sorted. I can't wait for you to get out of there, I'm so looking forward to us starting our new life together. Speak later. Angela xx*

It had been six years since Rob had died. Her two children lived away, and she only heard from them on birthdays, Christmas, or when they needed something. She didn't often see her grandchildren, whom she missed so much.

Over the years, Angela's friends had set her up on a couple of dates with their friends, but nothing came of them. They were nice men, but not for her. One of them was Mark, whom Angela had gone on a few dates with. He was good-looking, tall with broad shoulders, and he dressed well – she did find him attractive. He was five years older than her, and they initially got on well. They went to the theatre and had a couple of meals out and walks in the park, but, as time went on, Angela began to realise that he was becoming quite pushy. He wanted to see her much more than she was comfortable with and generally moved much faster than she was ready for.

She gradually withdrew, making excuses or cancelling dates at the last minute. Eventually she just came out with it and told him she didn't want to see him again.

Angela had a good life, holidayed with friends two or three times a year, and didn't want for anything. Rob had been astute and left her secure in a good home with enough money to live well. Angela felt that the amount of money in the bank meant nothing when there was no one special to share the good times with.

On a girls' night out, after sharing a couple of bottles of pro-secco, her friends set her up on a dating website. They had such a giggle that night, finding a reasonable photo to post, and not lying too much about her age. Kath, who had been a friend for many years, grabbed Angela's phone off the table and started to scroll through her photo gallery.

'Look at this one, you looked lovely here,' she said, showing the group a photo of Angela dressed up for a night out.

'That was years ago, my last Christmas work do with Rob. It was a lovely night.'

'I'll keep looking through for a more recent one.'

'What age are you going to put?' asked Jean, who was filling out the application.

'My proper age, I don't see the point in lying at this stage, do you?'

'Everyone lies about their age on these things,' they all said together.

This went on for a while, each getting tipsier and gigglier.

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They all went home, and Angela went to bed and forgot all about the dating site until the next day, when messages started to pop up. Shocked by some of the photos she received, she sifted through the messages. She couldn't believe the amount of interest there was in her profile, and she liked the look of a few of the men.

Over the next few months Angela had a string of dates, she had a giggle, some nice evenings out and day trips to local attractions.

None of these men were what she wanted. Some were very nice, just no spark; some were not so nice, with no personality or had lied about their age and used old photos on their profile. None of them were a patch on her Rob.

Looking at her watch, Angela realized she was going to be late for lunch at the café that she went to most days. Luke, the owner, had become a friend and she had met many people there over the last couple of years. She felt happy to be there; she felt safe. Grabbing her things, she walked up the road. Her friends, Jean and Kath, were sitting at their regular table. As she took a seat with them, she called hello to Luke and ordered herself a latte.

Angela, Jean, and Kath had become close over the last couple of years. They laughed and cried together. They met most days, and they had been involved in setting up the dating profile. Since Angela had met Max online, however, things had changed. They had become more distant. They whispered together, and made comments like: ‘How’s Loverboy today, Angela?’, or ‘When is your mystery man moving in?’ Angela couldn’t understand why they weren’t happy for her. They were on their own too, one widowed and one divorced, but they were content. That was fine for them, but Angela needed more. She wanted a special person in her life, and had found that in Max.

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Max had commented on a Facebook post that Angela had made. He had been charming and polite, and when Angela looked at his profile, she liked what she saw and read about him. Max was a

businessman in Boston, Massachusetts. He was widowed and had two grown-up children and three grandchildren. Max messaged her privately and their conversation flowed. He was so flattering and kind, and they appeared to have so much in common.

*I can't wait till all this is sorted and you are here with me.*

*It won't be long now my love; I can't wait to be with you and hold you in my arms.*

*You will love it here; it will be autumn when you come, it looks so colourful, but it will be colder than you're used to.*

*I won't feel the cold my darling, I will have you to keep me warm. I love you, Angela.*

Angela soon became smitten with him, enjoying the attention. Over the months that followed, they became closer. Angela trusted him, telling him about her life and how lonely she was. Max, in return, shared his life with her, telling her that they had so much in common, that they were just made for each other. When he started to tell Angela that he was in love with her and wanted to sell his business and move to England to be close to her, Angela was over the moon. She thought her dreams of a new life with a new man were on the horizon.

Max carried on messaging Angela daily, but his manner changed. He remained the same kind and loving Max, but he had started expressing concerns about his finances. He stated that he wouldn't be able to finance his visa to the UK.

*My darling Angela, I'm sad to say that things here are getting difficult for me and it may be much longer before I can get over to you.*

*Oh no, Max, why? What has happened?*

*I can't get an advance on my investments yet; my money is tied up.*

*Are you sure there's nothing you can do? I was so looking forward to you coming here and us being together.*

*It's not possible if I don't have the cash for a visa, unless you can help me, Angela?*

*How do you mean? What can I do?*

*If you could send me some money, I would be able to get my visa sooner. I would pay you back of course.*

When he suggested that he could be over sooner, Angela jumped at the idea and agreed to lend him the money. He sent over his bank details and with an eager click of a button, Angela sent him a bank transfer.

Later that morning, Angela walked to the café. As she entered, she noticed her friends huddled in a corner deep in conversation, but they stopped as soon as they saw Angela approaching. She took her seat at the table and Luke brought her a latte over.

‘How are you today, Angela, how’s the big romance going?’

Luke was well known for his straight-talking honesty. He was a caring man, but not tactful. Angela had known him for some years now, and didn’t take offense. She tensed.

‘I’m fine, Luke, and it’s going well, thank you. You’ll be meeting him soon. He’s just got to sort out business in America, then he’ll be over here.’

‘I’ll believe that when I see it,’ Jean said, laughing.

‘Well, you’ll see it soon, he’ll be here next month. He needs a visa first, but he’s got the money now.’

‘Wait, what do you mean “he’s got the money now”?’ Luke stopped what he was doing. ‘Have you been sending him money?’

The others started laughing, and Angela could see they thought she’d been gullible.

‘Just a bit to get his visa, all his money is tied up in business. He’ll pay me back, I know he will, he’s promised me.’ Angela was beginning to feel uncomfortable and where she had hoped for sup-

port from her friends, she was feeling let down and alone.

‘You daft bugger, haven’t you listened to anything any of us have said to you? For weeks we’ve been saying don’t send him money. It’s a con, he’s using you. How much have you sent him?’

‘You’re wrong, Luke, you don’t understand.’

‘Too bloody right! I don’t understand how someone gets to be your age and acts so bloody stupid.’

‘He loves me, Luke, he really does, he’s giving up everything to come and make a life here with me. I love him too, and I want to be with him.’

‘Let me see him again.’ His tone was a little softer now. Angela passed her phone to him.

‘Just look at the messages, Luke, look at how he talks to me. He means what he says, I just know it.’

‘Bloody hell, Angela, how much have you sent him? There are at least three messages here asking for money.’

‘It’s not really any of your business, is it, and I’ve had enough.’ Angela gathered her belongings and left. She hurried home, slammed the door and sobbed.

That evening, the doorbell rang. It was Luke. ‘Can I come in?’

‘Not if you’re going to carry on like earlier.’

‘I just want a few minutes, that’s all. I want you to see what I’ve found, then whatever you decide is up to you.’

They sat together and Luke showed her a series of photos, messages, and social media profiles. They showed Max with different women, offering them the world, just as he had with Angela.

She listened and looked at it all, and calmly asked Luke to leave. *Could I really be that gullible?* she thought as she poured herself a glass of wine and sat at the kitchen table, looking at the profiles of the other women Luke had shown her. Most of them were in

the UK, similar ages to herself, and all widowed or divorced. As she read through the profiles, she realised that she wasn't the only gullible one.

The following morning, after very little sleep, she awoke to three messages from Max. Reading them, seeing the amount of money he was now asking for, she messaged him back.

*Hi Max, or whatever your name is today. After discovering all the other women, you have been stringing along, I've decided enough is enough. I have messaged each one of them and now I am deleting you. Goodbye.*

Angela made a note of some of the names of the other women Max had been messaging. Perhaps she should message them and let them know what he was up to? Would they believe her? Perhaps not; she hadn't believed it herself, despite the warning from her friends. She would speak to Luke about that when she saw him later, but for now Angela pressed delete and blocked Max out of her life forever.

Angela entered the café that lunchtime, feeling more positive than she had in years. She hugged her friends and told them that thanks to Luke, she had come to her senses. Angela admitted to feeling lonely and that it was up to her to do something about that. 'I've booked a villa for two weeks in Portugal and I want you two to come with me. Let's have some fun, girls.' Jean and Kath stood up and hugged her, and Luke brought her latte over.

'Thank you for last night, Luke. I can't believe I allowed this, but I'm over it. I may have lost a thousand pounds, but I'm a whole lot wiser, and won't be such a pushover again.'

She raised her latte in the air. 'Cheers everyone, Portugal here we come.'

# The Final Battle

Zoe Bowker

Zoe Bowker is a Creative Writing student at the University of Lincoln and a part-time barista at Waterstones. Born in Milton Keynes, she studied Performing Arts before deciding to pursue writing. When she's not writing, she's keeping in touch with her musical side, perfecting her guitar skills.



Noah woke up swearing at the sunlight that had dared to seep through a crack in his shelter. He picked up a bottle from the many littered across the floor and swigged from it, only to find it empty. Swearing again, he picked up a half-empty one, letting the other drop, rolling across the cracked wooden planks, a dull clanking noise echoing around the room.

*'Shh.'* Baz was giggling. *A warm fire in the corner of the room – courtesy of a nifty campfire spell – casted a golden glow that made Baz's orange eyes dance along with the flames. Noah giggled; his vision hazy from the honeyfire. He bent over and picked up the half-filled bottle, swaying as he stood up again.*

*'We are definitely not allowed to be here,'* Noah whispered.

*'Perhaps not, but look what I found,'* Baz replied, holding up two new bottles of honeyfire and offering one. Noah looked from the bottle to the overturned floorboard for a moment before shrugging, deciding it wouldn't be worth arguing over, and taking a swig. *The liquid spread a warm feeling from his tongue down to his stomach, accompanied by a sweet taste that reminded him of warmer summer days spent lounging on long grass.*

*'Here's to the success of our recent mission and our great escape!'* Baz toasted.

*'You don't think we cut it almost too close?'* Noah thought back to the rubble collapsing behind them as they sprinted for their lives.

*'What's life without a little risk? If everything was easy this war would've finished before it began.'*

*'Sure, but sometimes it would be nice to not have to run for my life,'* Noah muttered, as Baz threw his head back, laughing, his brown mane of curls bouncing.

Noah trudged over to the window, waving his hand to pull aside the black sheet that covered it. He gazed out onto the ruins

of Castle Mourne, remembering the time there were high spires and stretching brick walls. It was hard to picture though, with the sky as desolate and grey as the rubble below. Noah was in one of the only structures still standing; it had a large kitchen with a spiral staircase in the middle that led to his room, cracked and crumbling in places, but still usable. A chandelier holding half-burnt-out candles hung above him, jealous of his magical fire. The fire crackled day and night, a small bedroll positioned next to it. Amongst the bottles were tattered old books with cracked spines and covers falling off yellowed pages. Noah had scavenged them from what was left of the library. Most of them were about how to identify certain plants for healing, with accompanying spells. He figured it was good to brush up on his skills, and it helped pass the time. Sometimes he'd hurt himself just to have something to practice on. The drink helped with that too.

*Nine metal books had smashed into the side of the turret where Baz had kissed Noah for the first time. Nine ropes wrapped around them, next to the cracked stained window they had exchanged vows by, a fresh morning sun projecting an array of colours that danced around them. Nine bodies hung at the bottom of the ropes.*

*Baz's was first, but Noah could hardly recognise his soulmate. The bond between them still rang from the snap, magic bouncing back and forth, searching for the other half. His body was torn and mangled, parts of his skin hanging off all the way down to the bone – the results of a flaying curse. His chiselled jaw had been blown clean off by a precise explosive hex and his orange eyes no longer crackled, now glazed over with white.*

To the left of Baz, Noah's sister hung. Her body mangled similar to Baz, but her face left intact. His mother was next, then his father. They had been forced to watch as the High Reeve tortured their daughter before being slaughtered themselves.

*'This is the result of your own doing, Noah,' the High Reeve spoke with a deep, growling voice. His chrome black mask reflected the sun when he turned his head, and Noah looked up at him, resigned to his fate. Around him, the High Reeve's minions – the Masked – were jeering, but the sound was muffled. It didn't matter; they could laugh all they wanted. There was nothing – no one – to hold on for anymore. If he had become a Healer, would he have been able to save Baz? Was there a counter-curse for the flaying spell? He should've been quicker. Who had betrayed them? He'd told Baz they shouldn't have been in that tower, but it was no use now. The bodies hanging in front of him – his family, his closest friends, his soulmate – were a reminder that nothing could be done. Magic couldn't bring back the dead.*

It had taken him a year and a half of researching to learn how to delay the effects of the flaying curse. He'd travelled all across Europe, leaving the scattered remains of the rebellion behind in search of a cure. He collected research from a plethora of magical creatures; wood nymphs from Germany, witches' covens in Albania, but he still hadn't found a cure. Defeated, he'd decided to come back. The rebellion hadn't been hard to find, welcoming him back with faces full of hope. They didn't think his findings were disappointing, but Noah knew they'd expected a cure. So, he turned once more to Castle Mourne.

'You're going to drink yourself to death, Noah,' said a bored voice coming from behind him. He felt the bottle slip from his hands and turned around, scowling. It was clear that the person before him was not human. A big tip-off was that their hair was not, in fact, hair at all, but thousands of tiny red snakes coiling and writhing in different directions. He sent a quick thanks to everything divine for the creation of Gorgaliser – a potion so gorgons could walk around without worrying about turning everyone they meet into stone – and held out his hand.

‘Give that back, Zendra,’ he said, but they just ignored him, their snakes hissing.

‘We’re having breakfast soon, if you can manage to stumble your way down,’ they called, heading downstairs without returning his bottle.

Disgruntled but hungry, Noah turned from the window and followed the smell of smoked meat and toast. The kitchen was a darkened cobbled grey, with a large cauldron and wood-fired stove. The counters were a dark-oak brown, and a stark contrast to Noah’s room. Everything had its own place; the cutting board went by the left of the stove, with the knife block next to it, and the pots and pans even had their own labelled cupboard. A young woman sat cross-legged on the edge of the counters. Twigs intertwined with her wavy, moss-green hair, as if a few strands decided they’d grow as a tree, and some even going as far as to blossom. Her green, doe-shaped eyes framed with freckles added to her natural beauty. She wore a green jumper she had crocheted herself dotted with mushrooms, the same pattern on her brown cargos to match. A tall, blond man was talking to her. Thanks to his siren heritage, he was the definition of handsome, with blue eyes, and muscles built into his muscles. In fact, he was so good-looking that Baz hadn’t trusted him alone with Noah for quite a few months.

‘G’morning, Vya, Felix,’ Noah grumbled as he reached the bottom step.

‘You want apple or orange juice?’ Vya asked, hopping down from the counter and waving her hand so that two jugs followed her, as if guided by a gentle breeze.

‘Where’s my bottle of honeyfire?’ Noah ignored her, addressing Zendra.

‘Honeyfire is not a breakfast drink,’ they shrugged and sat

down at a large pinewood table opposite the kitchen.

Noah sighed and joined them at the table, slipping skiebloo from a hidden flask into his orange juice when no one was looking. The liquor was not as strong as honeyfire, and instead of comforting warmth, it was icy cold. It was better than nothing though, and kept his orange juice nice and cold. Felix, who had been cooking over the wood stove, muttered *levitato* and joined them at the table, bringing with him a platter of ox bacon and slices of fresh ciabatta. They ate in silence for a few minutes before Vya cleared her throat.

‘I’ve found him,’ she said, and everyone went still.

‘Where?’ Felix said in a gruff voice.

‘He’s hidden very well, mind you, but I’ve been interrogating that spy we caught a few months ago. There’s a large mansion hidden in a pine forest in the Yorkshire Moors. He’s cast a bunch of defensive spells around the place, of course, but I have a pretty good timeline of the guard changes. There’s a split in the barrier we can use to get in, but it’ll be tricky keeping it open long enough to get through. According to the spy, the High Reeve has branded his closest with a dark circle that allows them to get through the barrier,’ she replied in a rush. ‘I think we can do it, though. I think we can get to him.’

Felix snapped his fingers, murmuring *scribe*, and a scroll of parchment flew across the room before unfurling itself and coming to a rest in front of him. Vya snapped off a thin twig from her hair, scrunching her hand around it and when she handed it to Felix, it had transformed into a quill.

‘I can start building that explosive,’ Zendra leant forward, their snakes bobbing.

They all looked at Noah, for whom it was strange to have been silent for so long. Noah gazed back at all of them.

‘How sure are you we can find him?’ He addressed Vya.

‘Almost a hundred percent.’

‘Almost isn’t good enough, Vya,’ he growled.

Felix frowned at him. ‘Well, she can’t be certain if none of us have scouted it out yet, Noah. Don’t be angry at her.’

Noah mumbled an apology, but Vya shook her head.

‘It’s okay, Noah. We’ll plan it out and prepare for every situation.’

‘How many of us are there?’ Zendra asked.

‘About fifteen.’

Noah remembered when their numbers were reaching a thousand, when it had seemed as though the war was in their favour. He looked around the table and expected to see a mirror of his own sorrow, so was surprised when the three faces were set in determination. Felix dipped the quill into a pot of ink and drew a square on one side of the parchment. He drew a line, marking it as the High Reeve in thin, scrawling handwriting.

‘I suggest we split ourselves into groups of two or three,’ Vya said. ‘That way we won’t draw too much attention.’

Noah nodded, his brain jumping to a file of names, sorting through them.

‘We’ll need some to stay behind as healers for the injured,’ Zendra added, and Felix wrote *healers* down next to a tag saying *group F*.

It was dinnertime when they had finished the plan, the sun outside casting a golden hue through the windows, warming the room. A week later, they decided on a date, choosing to wait until the days got shorter to aid their mission with more hours of darkness.

They spent the following two months preparing in any way

they could. Vya disappeared for weeks at a time, a twig her only correspondence, combing the Yorkshire Moors and drawing a map for them to use. She found the High Reeve's exact location, thanks to the spy she'd interrogated, and planted traps to catch out as many of his followers as possible. Felix worked with a small group of healers, re-training them and equipping them with skills for fighting. Zendra and Noah worked together to perfect the explosives, manipulating the magic encasing them to ensure none of their own would be killed.

When a light dusting of snow blanketed Castle Mourne, Noah called for a final meeting. Even though there were only fifteen of them, they had to magically stretch the kitchen to fit everyone in. Extra chairs conjured by Felix fit snugly around the now longer pine table, and everyone squeezed in cradling steamy mugs of an ambrosia-like nectar. Each sip tasted unique to the person drinking from it, but the usual healing properties of the ambrosia were absent. The map Vya had created, much more detailed than their original drawings, stood in the centre of the table. Small 3D models of a cluster of trees surrounded a large wooden house that sat behind a transparent dome.

'Alright. This time tomorrow, the war should be over,' Noah's gruff voice broke the silence that had fallen.

*'Alright, I wish I could tell you this is going to be easy – that we're going to win. But I can't. And I know that's depressing, so instead I'm going to remind you what we're fighting for. Who we're fighting against.'* Baz spoke in a clear, steady voice. Noah admired him, as he always did, for being able to do so. *It was hard, going into battle and rallying your troops, knowing full well most of them were going to die. 'The High Reeve has been hunting us down, picking us off one by one. Torturing our friends and family until they've lost their minds. He causes only chaos and destruction, and that's what we're fight-*

*ing against today. We're taking back our freedom, our safety. We're paving the way for future generations to live in peace knowing that they're safe no matter what species they are, what family they come from, or what runs in their blood. And yes, some of us will die.' There was a gasp that blew through the crowd, but Baz carried on. 'It is a known fact of war. But they will not die in vain. They will be honoured and remembered not as a fleeting thought, but every year in commemoration for their fight and all that they gave.'*

Noah swallowed. He had never given a pep-talk, let alone a pre-battle speech before. His mouth felt dry, like his tongue was made of cotton, and he took a gulp of his drink. Warm brownies mixed with salted caramel spurred him to carry on.

'We're more prepared this time. We've been planning and scouting the place out for months and each of us has memorised the guards' schedule. Group C goes in first, that's you, Trix, Olive and Gio.' A girl with braids decorated with gold bands nodded, along with the two people sat either side of her. 'Then my group – group A – follow in behind with Vya's group – B. Zendra, you have the potion, yes?'

Zendra held up a small vial with a bright yellow liquid inside. 'Enough to make me completely invisible for an hour.'

'Good, good. Group D will then come in after us should we need them. Group E, you guys are with Felix. We've set up a tent not too far off the location with all the supplies you'll need should things go south.' Noah hoped they wouldn't need the last two groups. 'I guess there's nothing more to say... we've been over the plan so many times I'm pretty sure you're all bored of it. So, I won't bore you any longer, just remember that nothing we do will be in vain.' Noah thought he could have said something a bit more inspiring but couldn't find the words. The others, however, seemed spurred by his words. They all broke off into groups, discussing



strategies and going over parts of the plan. It was another hour until they all left the tower, arms held up against the ice-layered wind sweeping through the grounds. Noah traipsed up to his room, half asleep, and it took a bottle of honeyfire before he could rest.

The next day had an air of anticipation. Noah heard a familiar whisper of cowardice when he woke up, a small voice trying to convince him to run away – find a small house in the middle of nowhere to hide in. He washed it away with the remnants of last night’s bottle. By the time the sun set that afternoon, everyone had gathered in front of Castle Mourne, laden with backpacks full of supplies from shield potions to melee weapons. In their groups, they each said *telepilo*, raising their hands into the air. Noah watched as they flew up into the air as if yanked by a colossal hand before disappearing. He waited until the last person had vanished before muttering the spell himself. There would never be a day where he felt comfortable teleporting. His shoulders jolted as he flew up into the air, paired with a heavy pressure in his ears and chest. The air around him constricted, and glimpses of landscape flashed before him. When he was sure his eyes were about to pop out of their sockets, the pressure eased, leaving him gulping down cold air in the midst of a pine forest. Lungs full, he turned to the rest of the group, who had arrived safe. A few of the younger healers were still out of breath, one of them on all fours retching by a tree. Doing a mental headcount, Noah realised with a dip in his stomach that they were down one person.

‘Where’s Zendra?’ he asked in a hushed voice.

‘They’ve gone to plant the explosive,’ Felix replied. ‘They left about a minute ago.’

‘Right, okay.’ The dip in his stomach tightened into a twist. Zendra had an hour to sneak through the barrier during the guard

change and plant the bomb.

Leading the rest, Noah walked a short distance to the tent they had set up. He felt the familiar embrace of the wards as he stepped inside. The tent was lined either side with beds, drawers he knew were full of medical supplies next to each one. It had been Felix who learned the spell that allowed them to squeeze so much into such a small place. The designated healers busied themselves, checking over the supplies and the others took seats on the beds. The minutes dragged by with no one having much to talk about. A twig snapped outside, and Noah advanced, pulling aside the tent front.

‘You ready to go get our lives back?’ Zendra stood in front of him, a look of smugness on their face.

‘As ready as I’ll ever be,’ Noah replied.

He turned back into the tent, ‘Alright guys. It’s time. Zendra’s planted the explosive, and the guards will be changing in a few minutes, so it really is now or never. Group C, we’ll be right behind you.’

The girl with braids, Trix, stood up along with another girl who had long hair reaching her ankles tied into a plait, and a burly looking boy. They made their way to the front of the tent, the others filing into their groups behind them. Walking as quiet as they could, they lead the way to the wooden house. Noah and the others hung back, watching Trix aim a spell soundlessly at the back of a guard, whilst the other girl, Olive, cast a different one at the other guard. The first fell to the ground whilst the second swayed on his feet before holding the barrier open. Trix, Olive and Gio advanced through the barrier and though the others could see nothing from the other side, shouts of spells were heard. Noah beckoned his group to follow him in, with Vya’s group joining him.

As they raced through the barrier, a sick feeling overcame Noah. They were outnumbered three to one. Masked were firing flashes of red and orange light, clashing with the blue return fire from Noah and his friends. He was caught in a duel with three of them, frantic in his movements, trying to deflect each spell cast towards him. There was not nearly enough time to cast anything offensive, and from the corner of his eye he saw Olive fly backwards into a tree, her head giving a sickening crack that carried through the shouting. Her body lay limp at the foot of the tree, and Noah gave a roar, sending out three wisps of smoke that curled around his opponents, squeezing them until their heads lolled to the side.

Three more people run through the barrier, and Noah directed them, joining Vya in fighting two Masked. He managed to cast a shield spell just before a curse would've hit a fatal blow on her, and she threw him a look of thanks. It was clear that these Masked were untrained. Perhaps even decoys, Noah thought as the two in front of him fell. He glanced around and saw they had defeated the majority. Grabbing Vya, Trix, Mason and Oattie, Noah led them inside.

They were met with more Masked. Trix, who had the misfortune of being at the front of the group, was sucked forward and deflected into a mirror. Instead of shattering, the mirror started swirling, ripping her limb from limb until there was nothing left. Vya cast a spell that slashed through the Masked in front of them, cutting them clean in half. Noah didn't wait for the bodies to drop before he proceeded. The long hallway they had entered broke off into two rooms, and he sent Oattie and Mason into one of them, leaving Vya and him with the other. It was dark inside, too dark to even make out silhouettes of furniture, but Noah could tell it was vast. He muttered *lithio* and a small, blue orb materialised in

the palm of his hand. He held it up, but as he did, two large silver ribbons reached out through the darkness, wrapping themselves around Vya.

‘Noah,’ Vya gasped in surprise.

The High Reeve stepped into the pale blue glow, his hand outstretched and twisting, controlling the ribbons.

‘Ah Noah. I was wondering when I’d be seeing you again. Come to kill me, have you?’ The red veins covering his face and arms stood out a stark contrast to the paleness of his skin, and when Noah looked closer, he noticed the red tinge to the High Reeve’s normally dark brown eyes.

‘Something like that,’ Noah replied, his voice steady despite the panic mounting in his head.

The High Reeve laughed, a deep growling sound that rumbled around the room. With a flick of his wrist, Vya was pinned up against the wall, a third ribbon securing itself around her mouth. ‘I’ll play with her later.’

He turned back to Noah, who raised his hand. A bright orange fireball broke forth, hurtling towards the High Reeve who merely chuckled, clicking his fingers causing the fireball to splutter and die out.

‘You’ll have to do better than that now, come on.’ He returned fire, casting a white dagger-shaped spell that shot towards Noah, who only managed to escape by jumping aside.

In the flash, Noah spotted the explosive Zendra had planted off to the left of where the High Reeve stood.

‘Death isn’t a good enough punishment for you, but it’ll have to do,’ Noah said, before swiping both his hands through the air, palms wide. The bomb soared, and for a moment, Noah was sure the High Reeve would see it. Vya let out a muffled scream, distract-

ing the High Reeve, who was hit in the side by the bomb. It exploded on impact. Noah was flung backwards, his shield spell protecting both him and Vya from the rubble. When the dust cleared, Noah raced forward. It was clear the High Reeve was dead, bits of skin and clothes decorating the room in which the darkness had lifted. Vya's ribbons disappeared and she fell to the floor. 'We did it, Vya. He's dead.'

# A Deadly Secret

Daisy E. Heywood

Daisy E. Heywood is a Welsh-born writer and poet. She lives in Lincoln where she is currently studying towards a BA in Creative Writing, and she will begin studying towards an MA in September. When she's not scrawling in her notebook, she can be found baking at home.

Paris, 24<sup>th</sup> April 1558

She looked ethereal, a dream standing in front of me. White silk draped across my lady's body, with ornate crystal beads weaved all over the dress. Mary, Queen of Scots, and the future Queen of France. I had never seen anyone as elegant as her. A delicate smile rested on her lips, emitting a glow as though she had been blessed by the Lord himself. Filtered sunlight came through the white fabric covering the windows, a sign of the sunny spring day ahead of us. I watched as she admired the rouge on her lips in the looking glass and I could not help but wonder what they would feel like against my own. The other ladies in waiting were standing around her, each assigned a different task in readying our lady.

Mary turned to me. 'How do I look?'

'You are a vision, Milady,' I said.

'Why, thank you, Jane,' she replied. The jewels laying on her chest glinted in the sunlight as she turned back to the looking glass.

A knock at the door announced the arrival of her crown. A servant laid a wooden box on the table next to us, opened it, and disappeared with a bow.

'Oh my, that looks too heavy,' Mary's voice broke through my thoughts as she admired the crown King Henri got made for her.

The gold crown rested in an oak box lined with red silk. Hundreds of jewels and pearls of every colour sat in the elaborate gold headdress. There were pearls, emeralds and diamonds, with a ruby the size of a medlar sitting at ease in the centre. A red jewel hanging below a bigger diamond, supported by a gold and pearl chain, was suspended from her neck, matching the ruby in her crown.

‘It even matches *Le Henri*,’ I said, pointing to her necklace as the other ladies placed the sparkling garland atop Mary’s red ringlets. Her hair, which was usually pinned back for horse riding and dancing, was half loose today. Small strands and braids were gathered at the back of her head with pearled hairpins.

‘Are you ready, Milady?’ I asked.

‘No. But I know I can grow to be prepared for this life, it is what I’ve been training to do for as long as I can remember,’ Mary said, her hands fidgeting in front of her, a clear sign of the nerves deep within her.

I nodded, knowing I would never understand how she was feeling. The future of France and Scotland rested on her young shoulders. Like me, she was just a girl, not even sixteen years of age. Yet here she was, ready to wed, ready to become the future Queen of France.

‘I am here for you, Mary. And that’s coming from your friend, not your lady,’ I said, walking towards her with my arms outstretched.

‘I know you are, Jane, and I cannot express how much that means to me.’ She pulled away from the hug and smiled at me. I returned it before checking the timepiece upon the mantle.

‘Come, it is almost time, let’s finish getting you ready,’ I said.

The other three ladies helped me lift the train attached to Mary’s mantle from the chestnut wardrobe it was hanging from. It was gorgeous, a six-foot long piece of velvet in a deep blue-grey colour. It was embellished with pearls to match her crown and necklace, embroidered with white silk in delicate swirling patterns that complimented the lily-white dress on my Lady’s body.

There was a knock at the door – one of the royal attendants had escorted the group of page boys in to carry Mary’s train.



‘My Lady,’ the attendant said with a slight bow. ‘The page boys are here, it is time to leave.’

‘Thank you,’ Mary said as she ushered to the boys to pick up her train.

We made our way out of the chamber, and I caught a glimpse of myself in the looking glass. A pale green fabric hugged my body, with silver-grey thread embroidered across it. It was made of the finest Italian silks, yet it was plain in comparison to Mary’s dress. I had two strings of pearls around my neck, and my hair was pinned under my French hood. The bustling morning had been so focused on Mary I had not had a chance to admire how I looked.

‘Jane, are you coming?’ one of the other ladies said, pulling me away from my reflection.

‘Yes, coming.’

We were greeted outside by two large carriages. The first one was gold with intricate sculptures of irises and cherubs decorating it. Two black horses with matching golden bridles stood in front of the carriage, with silky coats and braided tails. Another attendant opened the black door for Mary, and I caught a glimpse of the French coat of arms adorning it. Mary climbed into the carriage with grace and beckoned for me to join her. The rest of the bridal party entered the second carriage, also gold, but nowhere near as ornate as the one carrying Mary and me.

The journey to the cathedral was short, and we exchanged few words. I caught glimpses of the streets of Paris through the small curtains as we travelled. They were bursting with people, all hoping to see the future Queen. We passed over the Seine and I sensed Mary’s nerves growing with every minute. I reached over and placed my hand on her shaking arm as she fiddled with her fingers.

'It will be fine, Milady,' I said, urging her to feel calm.

'I know Jane. I love you,' she replied, placing her hand on my own.

My heart's thudding reached a higher rhythm than ever before. Those three words were ones I had wanted to hear for years, but I knew she did not mean them in the way I felt them.

I pulled the curtains of the carriage windows aside again to watch the crowds awaiting the ceremony. I could feel the excitement emanating from the subjects. Sun glinted off shop windows, shops that were empty bar their owners, who still managed to stand at the door, trying to catch a glimpse of the future Queen. Everyone was waving and cheering as we passed through. Bright colours scattered throughout the strings of people became a field of flowers; puffy dresses and straight, tailored outfits representing the finest of French fashion. This event was the most anticipated of the decade. The King's firstborn was marrying, and the entirety of Europe wanted to be there to witness the spectacle that would be his wedding.

I heard one of the black horses' neighs as the carriage pulled to a stop. I attempted to be elegant in my descent from the carriage, but I stumbled, and I heard a small giggle from behind me. I brushed myself off and saw the silver thread in my gown sparkle in the sunlight. On a normal day, I would have attracted several suitors. But today was not a normal day.

I stepped aside as two footmen arrived to assist my Lady out of the carriage. Seeing her in the natural light stunned me; I had never seen anyone look as dazzling as she did. Her hair was ablaze in the light, a stark contrast to her paper-white skin that was holding a mask of confidence and authority.

Notre Dame was covered in streamers and white flowers. And people. More people than I could ever have imagined. Yells and

whoops emerged from the crowd as we approached the cathedral, us ladies in waiting leading the procession, followed by Mary and the boys carrying her train. It took everything in me not to look back at Mary, to admire her once more before she became officially out of my reach.

A carpet of the finest wool had been laid out for the flower of France to walk on. Her dress stood out against the soft grey wool below her. She was a blessing to the French public gazing on her. She waved, and they all cheered. They were happy. I was happy. They knew the future of France was in the delicate hands of Mary. Yet Mary was an actress – her face displayed happiness and joy, while I knew her mind was spiralling within.

We were escorted into the cathedral, and the echo of the crowd faded to almost nothing. I could hear chatter from inside the hall as the excitement grew further. I turned to Mary and offered a look of reassurance.

‘Are you ready?’ I asked.

‘I do not think I can do this,’ she replied, the confident disguise dropping from her face.

‘You can do this. I– we all love you, the subjects will all love you. They will treat you as though you yourself are French,’ I said, placing my arms around her. ‘We are all here, we will all be by your side through this.’

‘I know, I know, Jane. But what if he does not deem me a good wife? What if he follows in Great Uncle Henry’s footsteps? I do not want to die, Jane.’

‘He will not. He loves you; I know that for sure.’

I could feel the fear throbbing from her, but I did not have much time left to convince her it would be all right. Part of me did not want to, part of me hated every word I said, but I pushed

those feelings down. It would be better for the country, for the continent. It would be better for us.

‘I know. But what if I am not good enough?’

‘You are, I know you are. Let me ask you a question?’

‘Yes?’ she nodded.

‘Do you love Francis?’

‘More than anything.’

‘Then you will fit well as his wife, his love will protect you,’ I said.

‘Love does not matter, Jane. This marriage is political, for both countries,’ Mary said.

‘I know, Mary. But you have the extremely rare opportunity of having both of those things in one marriage. Your political ties will protect you, too.’

‘It does not matter,’ she repeated, as another servant came through the door.

‘Ma’am,’ the servant said, ‘they are ready.’

A huge cheer came from the courtyard outside as the bells chimed twelve, confirming what the servant had said, and I knew it was time. Attendants and ladies gathered around us to do some last preparations, making sure Mary’s hair was perfect, that her dress sat just right. Her previous confident façade melted back into place and a smile softened on her lips. The young boys accompanying us picked up her train once more and I turned to face the door, flashing Mary one last look before the ceremony began.

‘I love you,’ I mouthed, knowing she would never understand the depth of those words from my mouth.

A hush fell on the cathedral. I came last in the line of ladies in waiting. We were all wearing a different colour, one red, one black, one blue, and my green. We entered the hall, decorated just as elab-

orately as the outside. Even more white flowers adorned every inch of the hall, white fabric draped from the ceiling, and hundreds of candles lined the aisle. I could see Francis standing at the end, next to the Archbishop of Rouen. They were both dressed in their finest wears, Francis in a fresh pressed linen shirt with extravagant ruffles at the neck and sleeves. He wore a red doublet embroidered with gold thread. His long cape matched his doublet, a deep red with the same intricate embroidery. Atop his head rested a crown, similar to Mary's, but with less jewels. A grin stood proud on his face, and adoration glimmered in his eyes; I knew Mary would be reassured the second she saw him.

The archbishop was dressed in white and gold, a loose white shirt layered under his magnificent gold vestment. The attendant to the left of him was bearing a huge golden cross, to represent God's blessing of this wedding.

We made our way down the aisle, and I felt something burning within me. I refused to acknowledge it. Once we arrived at the altar we were ushered to the left, and I turned to watch Mary as she walked down the aisle towards us, arm in arm with the King.

My thoughts were snatched from me as I watched; the fierce beauty she displayed overwhelmed me and I felt the feeling rising again. Everyone was on their feet. Royals and diplomats. They did not know her. They would never know her. Not like I did. I was jealous. I was angry. But the consequences I would face dawned on me, I knew I could not let this feeling overtake me. I would most certainly be tortured for how wrong it was. Perhaps they would even try me as a witch, like those I had heard about in Switzerland. Mary would face such disdain that no country would ever want to be politically involved with her again, and I could not put her through that.

*I could ruin this wedding; I could burn this country to the ground.*

I was having an internal battle worse than those seen during the Hundred Years' War. I prayed my face displayed happiness, a deep contrast to the hellscape I felt beneath. A bead of sweat slithered down my face, my cheeks warming more and more. I had to be happy. This was a joyful day. My Lady was happy, I should be happy. I hoped and prayed that this anger would disappear, that no one would notice the anger on my face, or the rouge I had applied earlier would cover it.

'If anyone has any reason that they believe this marriage must not go forward, please speak now.' The archbishop brought me out of my thoughts. The inner conflict grew wilder. This was my chance. But in front of all these people? I felt the other ladies in waiting watching me, they could tell something was wrong with me.

Images of what would happen if I spoke up flickered through my mind: tightly bound cord around my hands, and being escorted to the rack, my limbs stretched away from my body. I saw Mary and Francis standing in front of me, giving the order for the executioner to drop the axe. I would beg and beg for them to stop, but I knew they would have no choice.

'Then we shall continue,' the archbishop said. I'd missed my chance. But that was all well, it was for the best.

'Do you, Francis Valois, take this woman to be your wife, to live together in holy matrimony, to love her, to honour her, to comfort her, and to keep her in sickness and in health, forsaking all others, for as long as you both shall live?'

'I do,' Francis replied.

'And do you, Mary Stuart, take this man to be your husband, to live together in holy matrimony, to love him, to honour him, to

comfort him, and to keep him in sickness and in health, forsaking all others, for as long as you both shall live?’

‘I do,’ Mary said, beaming.

With those two words the crowd exploded with happiness, cheers and whoops and applause filled the silence. The cathedral’s bells began to ring, blessing the royal couple with their noise. Petals were thrown from the pews, covering the couple in hints of pink, red and white. I could not see anything but their smiles, joy exuding from each person in the cathedral, aside from me. I forced a smile onto my face, willing it to look real, willing it to feel real. I wanted nothing more than to share in their elation, to feel an ounce of the happiness the subjects did. Yet there I was, feelings of discontent stirring within me.

It was done. They were wed. I tried to be happy for her, for them, but the restless jealousy was still swirling inside me. But it was my secret, and I had to keep it. I had to stay hidden.

# Flowers of Deceit

Katherine Bird

Katherine Bird is a writer and poet born and raised in London. She is completing a BA (Lincoln) in Creative Writing. Taking inspiration from the news, she often writes about dystopia and dysfunction. She can frequently be found furiously typing up a story behind the reception desk of her university.



‘At the next exit, turn... left.’

I spun the wheel with one shaky hand and pulled the brake with the other, slowing to a stop in front of the entrance. My phone pinged: I had arrived at my destination. Removing it from its mount on my dashboard, I switched over to my recent texts, double-checking the address. I didn’t need to double-check the email.

*Dear Ms. Noir, it started. I hope this email finds you well. My name is Elise Laurent.*

I was in the shower when it came through. For thirteen minutes the greatest opportunity I was ever going to have sat in my inbox, unanswered. I committed to memory the last seconds of my life before: hair wrapped in a towel sliding off as I walked, reaching for my glasses because no one keeps their contacts in past 10 p.m. A couple of clicks and it loaded in. Mere moments of confusion, processing, realisation, and it had happened.

There are events in every person’s life that make a change. When it hits, a mark of ‘before’ is cast on all your memories and, quite suddenly, you’re living in the ‘after.’ Everything feels a little closer, or colder, or tilted to the left by about three degrees. Good news, bad news, doesn’t matter. You’ve changed.

The car door slammed behind me, gravel crunching underfoot as I walked to the boot and grabbed my bags. The front door was pale wood with frosted glass panels, matching the country vibe of the house, two storeys painted white. Most of the beautiful windows displayed nothing but drawn grey curtains, but a few on the ground floor were open. Stepping up onto the stone foundation, I raised a hand and knocked. The gentle footsteps were hardly audi-

ble over the sound of my heartbeat.

I hadn't taken the time to be concerned about their resemblance until I was already driving. I obviously knew they were sisters; it just never crossed my mind. Maybe I couldn't imagine that anyone else could look anything like Vivienne Laurent. She was an era-defining beauty, after all. It hadn't occurred to me she would ever be matched, not now, even by family. That pearl was never going to be seen again.

There hadn't been much time to think about anything else. The date she wanted to see me was soon, and it was a lot to process. I had spent all I had coming to terms with it. Its message was clear, despite the lack of detail; Vivienne Laurent was dead, and I was going to be the one to break the story.

The door swung open, and in a second I was brought back to reality. The girl in front of me looked to be about my age, mid-twenties or so, with mousy brown hair that just reached her shoulders, which were hunched over like she was trying to shrink. Her face was small, with bitten lips and a nervous quirk to her eyebrows. She was wearing a simple blue dress, no patterns, down to her knees. I almost wanted to sigh in relief. She was no Vivienne.

'Ms. Noir?' she said, words light and shaky.

'Amelie is fine.' I stuck out a hand, which she gingerly took. On the job, a polite and professional approach is always best, even if they're the sister of Vivienne Laurent. 'Lovely to meet you, Elise. I'm sorry for your loss.'

Her eyes tracked my face as I held my solemn expression. She stepped to the side of the doorway. 'Please come in.'

We entered a hallway with multiple doors and a stairway down the corridor. The walls were plain but covered with paintings, with wood panels for flooring. I wondered if there was underfloor heat-

ing. After I walked in, Elise locked the door and left the key on the side table, which was bare, save a plant in a vase. I didn't want to think about how much it'd cost to replace that vase if I broke it. We carried on walking. Each door was helpfully labelled in gold plating – toilet, kitchen, sitting room, dining room – so she didn't point them out as we went until the last.

'I'll be serving dinner in there at seven-thirty, if that's okay with you.'

I nodded. 'Just to make sure we're on the same page, I'll be staying here two nights?'

'Y-Yes, two nights. In terms of compensation...'

I laughed and shook my head. She knew I didn't come here for the money. 'We can discuss that later. When would you like to start?'

Elise thought for a moment. 'I think you should probably bring your stuff up to your room first. It was a long drive; you must be tired. Are you hungry at all?'

I shook my head no and followed her upstairs. I'd be good to start anytime, as I usually was with anything concerning Vivienne, but I couldn't lie and say I wasn't planning on exploring the rest of the house as soon as possible. Who else had gotten access to Vivienne Laurent's childhood home before?

On the landing was a gorgeous red carpet I avoided stepping on in my boots. Across from the stairwell were two doors, labelled Vivienne and Elise respectively. Down the hallway, I could spot another door, which Elise said was a bathroom. There was more around a corner – possibly the parents' bedroom – but she didn't comment, so I didn't ask.

'You'll be staying in Vivienne's room, if that's okay,' she said.

I tried as hard as I could to contain my excitement. 'That's ab-

solutely fine, no worries at all.' A bit of it might've slipped into my speech as Elise looked slightly startled, or maybe it was the speed with which I walked forward and twisted the doorknob. I almost wanted to stop and imagine Vivienne's hand on it.

The room looked bare. White wainscoting complimented the cerulean wallpaper. Vivienne had always been associated more with red in her acting years, so it was curious to see. There wasn't much: only a bed, closet, and desk. The lack of personal effects wounded me, but the orangey wooden furniture didn't leave the room feeling plain, intricate carvings on each surface. They must've come as a set. My hand twitched as I suppressed the urge to pull out my notebook and begin describing all this new information with Elise in the doorway.

I walked to the bed and dropped my bags beside it, sitting on the duvet. Maybe Elise was right about the drive, because I was abruptly quite knackered.

She was still standing in the doorway, shifting from one leg to another. 'Um, do you want me to bring you any tea or anything?'

'I'm alright, thank you. How about we start work after dinner?' That'd give me some time to rest and get my head in order. And make my notes. Lots of notes.

Elise looked relieved to hear she'd have a bit more time to prepare herself. Good. If I spooked her, I wouldn't get anything out of her. 'O-Okay! I'll see you at seven-thirty. Do you like, um, fish?'

The rest of the conversation was a blur as I nodded along until she disappeared, my exhaustion creeping in now I was sitting down again. Probably a mix of physical and emotional; this was going to be the biggest story of my life, I knew it. Now that I was here, I could afford to relax. I'd finish my own house tour later, when I had the energy. I needed a good sleep.

Vivienne's room was just as empty as it looked. In the right corner was the bed, made up with white sheets, alongside a bedside table holding only a lamp. To my left was an empty desk, chair tucked in beneath. Nearer the window was a closet, also empty, as well as a floor-length mirror. Checking over the desk more thoroughly, I found nothing until I came to the bottom right drawer. Tugging on the pull, nothing moved. It didn't feel stuck or look broken, so it was probably locked. I could feel curiosity licking at me, but one look at my phone told me seven-thirty was fast approaching and the chance to hear a personal account of Vivienne Laurent had been boiling under my skin for the last week.

Narrowly avoiding bouncing down the stairs, I came in just as Elise was slipping out, table laid. I slid into my seat as she came back in with the dish, serving me first. My stomach groaned at the smell; I often forgot to eat with good press on my mind.

'Thank you so much, it looks delicious.' I took a bite and smiled. Her face brightened. That expression suited her better. 'It is delicious. Do you usually cook?'

'Just for myself, um, mostly.' As she leant over her plate, her hair shielded her from my gaze, but I imagined she could feel it. I needed to taper it off a bit. I knew I could be a bit intense sometimes.

We ate in silence as I tucked in, starved. When I was about finished, I asked, 'Did you ever cook together when you were younger?'

Elise made a choking noise, like she'd swallowed a mouthful without chewing. '...sometimes. Mother used to call us down after

school each day. We'd barrel down the stairs to help. She said whoever got there first would be her sous chef, and second place head dishwasher... Vivienne was faster than me, so she always won. Even when she wasn't first, she won. Mother said she just got used to her cooking.' She looked up as I slid my phone onto the table, recording software open. Her eyes lingered on it for a moment. I nodded.

Placing down her fork, Elise continued, staring down at her hands. 'Sometimes Vivienne would have friends over. She'd invite me, but... Mother thought it would be inappropriate, and her friends didn't like me much. Those evenings, I got to help cook. They always said my food was good, but Father never complimented it the way he complimented Vivi's.'

Vivi, cute nickname. She could cook. She had friends over frequently when she was younger, of course she did. All this exclusive information about Vivienne made my brain melt. Outwardly, I kept my composure, nodding along.

'Vivienne was always good at things. Everything. As soon as she could, she ran off to that academy, never wrote to me once...?' Elise's eyebrows furrowed in guilt. 'Sorry, I'm wasting your time.'

I reached across the table for her hands, feeling her twitch when I placed mine over them. 'Elise, it's okay. I'm happy to listen to anything you want to tell me about Vivienne. You said you wanted this story to come from the heart, so I'm not going to judge you for your honesty.'

Her gaze flitting around my face, Elise took a breath in. We locked eyes; all I could think was that they were duller than hers.

'It's okay, I promise. Tell me more about your relationship with Vivienne.'

That night, I stared at the ceiling, wondering if that blessed nap had doomed me to insomnia. Then again, I had a lot to think about.

Elise's inferiority complex wasn't a big surprise. Many feel brushed aside for their younger siblings without even having a famous one. And it didn't sound like she was acknowledged nearly so much by their parents, or even Vivienne herself. Vivienne never spoke about her private life in any interviews, bar one after her cinematic debut, a supporting role in an unexpected smash hit. It was in this interview that she mentioned her sister – once, and only once, the last time she publicly spoke Elise's name. It was no more than a brief mention. That was also the only time she had spoken about her pathway here; all we knew was that she went to an academy for acting when she was fourteen. That interview wasn't even available online, as far as I could tell. I kept my copy laminated.

The thought had me sliding out of my covers and over to my bags, pulling out my binders of articles, interviews, everything Vivienne-related in print. These would be useful tomorrow – well, today. Elise didn't seem comfortable with Vivienne's work, so we lacked conversation topics in that regard. I still thought going over her work would do well for the interview. With her childhood segment covered, it'd be great to find out Vivienne's real feelings behind all her releases. If a film bombed, she couldn't be fully honest about what she thought to the cameras. The distance their parents put between them didn't sound like it had faded, but Elise wouldn't have brought me out here if she didn't have anything to say. She wanted the world to know her sister the way she knew her. I was more than happy to oblige.

Too excited to even sit still, I jumped up, grabbed my phone,

and went for the door. I hadn't gotten to check out the parents' room yet – I might as well get a move on that if I had the energy to spare.

As soon as I stepped foot on the landing, I heard something. A muffled whimper, like an injured animal. I wondered if there was a dog or something outside – God, I needed to ask about childhood pets – before I realised the sound was coming from Elise's door, slightly ajar. I shuffled over, careful to avoid making noise. Once I was close enough, I took a peek.

Her room had a similar layout to mine in terms of furniture, only mirrored in placement. She also didn't have a full-length mirror, rather a smaller one placed on her desk, next to a lamp. It looked more like a vanity. The desk itself was covered in various makeup products – cheap shit, nothing like the high-end stuff Vivienne's sponsor companies would provide. Elise was trying to apply it, but she was struggling – it was melting off her face from the tears. Looking closer, it seemed to me that she was trying to emulate Vivienne's style, or maybe even her face. Before I could deduce anymore, our eyes met in the mirror. She spun to face me.

'Oh– I'm so sorry, Elise. I was just on my way to the bathroom, and I heard a noise. I didn't mean to pry.' I pushed the door open as I spoke, taking a few steps into the room. The low light illuminated her face, expression unreadable, muddled by the makeup stains. 'I just wanted to make sure you're alright.'

Closer, I could see the lack of sleep. Her hair stuck to her face in strands, wet from her tears. Elise slumped back around as her tired eyes slid back to the mirror. Her voice was low when she spoke. 'I wanted to see her again.' And it had probably worked, until her eyes must've blurred too much. Normally I'd reach out and offer a hand on her shoulder, but something about her was making



me uneasy. Her speech was much less staggered than it usually was, lacking that careful consideration of every word. She seemed like she was reaching the end of her tether, and when you're in the business of being nosy, you learn whose buttons not to press quick.

No prodding, no comfort, keep close to the door. A sob ripped itself from her throat, trickling down her body in waves of shivers. Her arms came up to wrap around herself. No, she wasn't a threat. I was by her side in a second, holding out my arms. She grasped my hand and pulled me closer, into a hug. 'She's still with us. With me and you, Elise.' A few minutes passed as I held her, whispering all the while. She couldn't stop shaking. 'I miss her too.'

Once her sobs had reduced to sniffles, I took my leave. I don't know how long I was there for, only that we didn't speak of it again. She hadn't told me, but it was easy to assume the parents weren't in the picture. The last piece of her family was shattered and, in a fucked-up way, I was probably the closest to Vivienne she could get.

This was the greatest story I was ever going to have.

What I do recall is walking back, remembering my aspirations of investigating the parents' room. I went as quickly as I could, exhaustion catching up with me again – there wasn't even a mattress on the bed frame, but there damn sure was a key.

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The next day Elise caught me over breakfast, asking if we could start work earlier that afternoon with a smile. Something about it must've reminded me of Vivienne, because I was hit with that brightness again. Vivienne had always shone, but she was a partic-

ular kind of sun, like no other; she burned so bright it was hard to look at sometimes. But not for me. Never for me. If I had ever had the chance to speak to her, I would've told her as much. Elise's smile just reminded me of it, of that charisma I figured she fundamentally lacked. It would've left me wondering why her parents hadn't seen it shine in her too... if not for the diary.

The key was for the drawer in Vivienne's bedroom, as I thought. Lord knows why it was where it was, the diary or the key – by courtesy of her mother or Elise herself, I supposed. The book was leatherbound and dark, inconspicuous if not for its obvious hiding spot. Elise had written the events of everyday life in perfect handwriting. You'd figure it would've been the perfect place to store some dirt or secrets, but I found nothing of that kind, not even implications. It was all innocent recounts of exactly what had happened that day. In fact, the most notable part was that each entry was so complimentary towards her sister. Not that the rest was useless, but every single 'Vivienne detail' was notable to me, and take notes I did.

I fought the heaviness of my eyes for hours reading it front to back, back to front, almost. The writing stopped around three quarters of the way through the book, with one final entry about how Vivienne had lamented leaving Elise behind. Elise promised to sneak the book into her luggage, so Vivienne could keep a piece of her by her side. I guess that didn't make it. The closeness of the pair seemed commendable, after all the pressures their parents had put them through.

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We agreed to talk again in the dining room for ease. The conversation went smoothly; I started by recounting a history of Vivienne's

performances, half for the article and half because it seemed like Elise wanted to listen. It was only meant to be a short rundown to jog her memory, but she wasn't telling me to stop. It was hard enough for me to not feel enraptured every time I spoke about Vivienne to begin with. Her eyes lit up with something every time I listed off another great name, so many feelings flashing though at once I could barely recognise any of them. Several hours had passed by the time she stopped me.

'I was thinking some inside knowledge would be great here,' I started.

Elise's voice was quiet. 'I don't, um, I don't really have any.'

'What do you mean? Did you not talk?'

'Well... no, we didn't.' Her gaze became distant, even as she twisted her hands together. 'When she died, we hadn't spoken in years.'

I wasn't proud of the abrupt fury that hit me. 'What the f— Why didn't you tell me that earlier?'

Elise floundered. 'I-I've only known you a day or two—'

'And you've told me just about everything else, haven't you? How your parents preferred your sister, how you loathed her for it – what, you couldn't get that book in her luggage so you just stopped talking? Have you grown that resentful that she's successful—'

'What?' The urgency in her tone stopped my rant dead in its tracks. Embarrassment began to slip in and the need to retreat rang like an alarm.

'...I'm sorry. I'll cool off outside.' Elise didn't say anything, she just gave a light nod and stared off into space.

I checked the time. Four. Well, I'd blown it. My one true shot. At least I'd be home tomorrow.

As seven-thirty approached, I almost wanted to skip dinner. I knew I couldn't, but the gardens were peaceful, and it certainly wasn't cold enough to necessitate going inside until I had to. When I sat down about five minutes late, the food was already on the table. Beautifully roasted beef with herby mashed potatoes. My eyes lit up, and not just out of hunger.

'This is Vivienne's favourite, isn't it?'

When I looked up, my heart burst.

Vivienne Laurent was in front of me, glowing, in front of me. No, no, someone who looked just like Vivienne Laurent was in front of me, and suddenly I wasn't burning anymore. I was sitting in a wooden chair, faced with some delicious food and a woman I'd hurt deeply just hours ago.

'Y-You...' I started, coughing when my voice broke. 'How did you do that? Her makeup is a lot more expensive – not that you couldn't afford it, I just didn't hear any deliveries, you...' Being so near to her was making me sweat. Elise held my gaze, steady. She wasn't eating. I wanted to start, but something about the idea of looking away from her made me feel afraid.

'You know what, um. I don't feel very well right now. I think I'm just going to go upstairs and rest for a bit. I'll be back down again later to chat. Sorry, I know you've gone through all the effort to make this wonderful food for me, I'm sure it's delicious. I'm just gonna...' Elise wasn't saying anything. I stood up out of my chair, forcing the eye contact to break as I tried not to look like I was rushing out of the room.

The second I got inside I stuffed my binders back into my bags, zipped them up and dragged them to the door. Less than a

minute later all I was looking for were my car keys. Car keys, car keys, car keys, where the fuck were my car keys? I didn't know what was going on with her, but I needed to go home. Where were they? Maybe I'd left them by the vase by the front door, where Elise kept the house key.

I stepped out into the hall, trying to move quickly but quietly to avoid raising any suspicion. Before I could even make it to the stairwell, I knew something was wrong. All the lights were off downstairs. The hallway light too; I could barely see anything. The only light was coming from Elise's room, the door wide open. Trembling, I made my way towards the room and looked inside.

The furniture wasn't visible anymore. All I could see were dresses upon dresses, all vibrant colours, different costumes Vivienne had worn over the years. With a second glance, I could see they were all torn. The mirror was smashed to bits, only half of it still in its frame. The room was chaos apart from the bed, perfectly made, with one object placed in the centre. The diary, flipped to about three quarters of the way in.

'...ah.' I breathed in, out. In, out. 'So that's who you are, then, Vivienne?' I asked, willing my voice not to shake. It didn't listen.

I couldn't hear the footsteps over my heartbeat. One moment I was standing, the next there was an explosive pain on the side of my skull, and that was that.

# The Depths

Willow Ribbans

Willow Ribbans is an English/French writer that is based in Lincoln. He is currently working toward a BA (Lincoln) in Creative Writing. He enjoys all facets of writing, from the characters, to the nitty gritty of grammar although he still stumbles over a comma or two. Playing TTRPGs keeps their creative brain flowing.

I sat in my quarters. A comfortable silence loomed over me. I held the quill to the map, charting our previous course. It had been a long journey; we were close to Tortuga. At this speed, we would reach it in four days, providing the seas were rewarding. We could survive until then. Muffled orders destroyed the silence; Kimmie had begun ordering the crew around. A few groaned at the prospect of being ordered around by a woman, but she was quick to shut them down. I never believed in the bad luck of having a woman aboard. They were just stories told by the elders to steer women away from the sea. Kimmie was an outstanding pirate, someone I trusted with my life, and she made a perfect first mate. She belonged at sea. It was her home.

There was a bang on my door.

‘Cap’n, the Redcoats found us. They’re following behind,’ Kimmie’s voice rang through.

I attempted to put the maps away, spilling the ink bottle in the process. The dark liquid filled the map in a perfect circle. I swept the entire table. Not on my ship. Not with my crew. I put that image to the back of my mind, keeping it to myself. I stared at the desk. The circle had bled through the paper.

I turned away, opening the door to Kimmie. There was a look of worry on her face.

*Boom.* They had fired. There was a splash in the water beside the ship. This was serious. I climbed to the helm, and Kimmie followed with haste, bringing out the spyglass from her hip. I watched as the ship grew bigger and closer.

One cannon. Another. They were gaining. This couldn’t be. Their ships should have been slower and heavier. I pulled the spy-

glass from Kimmie's hand and peered through. The captain was looking at the ship, his own spyglass in hand. He waved as he sailed closer. I studied the ship, the sails catching in the wind. As they billowed, it unearthed a secret the Redcoats were hiding. They had modified their ship, a second sail behind the first – something that propelled them faster. They had the surprise on us; I screamed to Kimmie.

'First mate, take cadets and ready the cannons. Tortuga is within our grasp, and we shall take it.'

A roar of assurance came from the crew, and Kimmie called for the newest cadets and took them below. There was no running, I was smart enough to know that. I stood at the helm looking forward. This was going to be our biggest fight yet. The image of the circle surfaced in my mind. I had to push it back down. The ship was getting closer, and with it, that Redcoat captain's smile. I turned and stood at the head of the helm facing the deckhands. I held onto the railing and closed my eyes. Feeling the wood under my calloused hands, I heard the waves and the shouting of the crew on the ship.

I took a shaky breath and from the gut I started a low shanty.

*Now we are ready to sail for the Horn.*

*Weigh hey, roll and go.*

*Our boots and our clothes, boys, are all in the pawn.*

*To be rollicking randy dandy-oh.*

It became deep and rich, igniting a fire in us as we prepared to take this fight head on.



*Heave a pawl, oh heave away!*

*Weigh hey, roll and go!*

The shanty ended and my eyes were steady on the horizon, awaiting the fight ahead.

‘Trust me, my men. Furl the sails, drop the anchor starboard,’ I called to the Bowman and Boatswain.

They had looks of confusion on their faces, yet they carried out my orders. The sails rose and tied; I felt the ship start to slow. I peered through the spyglass back at the Redcoat, and the same confusion crossed his face. The anchor had been dropped as it caught the seabed; the ship lurched to the port side. Our cannons now faced the ship speeding towards us, ready to make cannonballs fly. The Redcoat watched with a furrowed brow at what I had just planned. As they kept approaching, it dawned on him what I had chosen to do. He was mortified. He moved his arms to signal a turn so they wouldn’t hit us head on.

‘Fire!’ Kimmie’s voice screamed from below.

A symphony of cannons fired and hurtled in the air towards the turning ship. A few missed and fell into the water; a couple hit the mark. Wood splintered and metal broke, short cheers were yelled before they got back to work loading the cannons once again. My face twisted into a smile. I felt the smoke of the cannons dance with my cheeks, smelt the fresh powder in the air. We had gained the upper hand. The image of the circle of ink stayed in the shadows of my mind, gnawing and biting, trying to get me to react to it. It was trying to get me to be cautious of every little thing as though it would be the end. I wouldn’t let it do that. It wasn’t allowed to decide that for me.

The ship lurched in the water; a shower of splinters fell from

the sky. The Redcoats had returned fire and were just as accurate. A cannonball swiped across the deck and picked up an unsuspecting member. Only their feet remained, the ankle bones poking out from the flesh. Another cannonball crashed through the windows of my quarters, destroying the beautiful, ornate artwork that had been stained into it. The last hit the hold of the ship, ripping through the wood.

‘Get the spare, patch what we can,’ I called out.

Two took the job and ran into the ship to help. This was the problem with what I had told my crew to do: we were now stationary. To get going again would require a lot of power that we did not have. This was a final stand. We all knew this.

Another round of cannon fire went flying into the air. The ship had turned and was perpendicular to us. The cannonballs went high, striking the railing of the ship. A scream rang out from the ship; someone had been hit. The ships were much closer now. I held a hand on my cutlass, readying myself to engage in combat. Others followed, waiting for someone to make the first move. It was better to wait; the gap was still quite big.

I saw a couple of Redcoats climb the splintered railing holding onto ropes. They kicked off over the open water. They let go at the height of their swing, arms flailing as they hit the side of the ship and fell into the water. It was still too early to tell but we were close. Life or death was the only thing that mattered in this fight, and I was hoping for life. We both shot cannons at each other as their ship circled us. We had casualties and so did they. Splinters of wood flew all over the place as I followed with my eyes. My heart wouldn’t slow, convinced that one of these cannonballs would be the end, that it would be something so small.

We were struck once more, and as it hit the bottom of the

ship, water began to fill the hole. Lucky shot, I thought. But now was the time. Many Redcoats had swung over to the ship. Cutlasses clashed together; shouts of pain rang out. The front of their ship began to sink, and a loud creaking sound filled the air as it started breaking in half. Someone had slipped by and came towards me. Within seconds, my cutlass had been drawn, and I was in a fight with someone less experienced than I.

They looked no older than seventeen. I felt sorry for them. I stared into their fresh brown eyes as I stabbed them through the stomach and moved my cutlass upwards, cutting through their ribs. I watched their colour fade. I laid them down gently onto the floor and moved to the stairs. My hands were about to get dirty. With confidence, I walked down the stairs, my cutlass ready to meet the blade of any Redcoat that dare try. One was brave enough, an older one compared to the first. He knew what he was doing with his blade. He was able to get a slash into my side. The pain was nothing new; I had many scars like this one. I clenched my teeth. I held the cut, the blood trailing over my fingers. He was skilled; I couldn't get too cocky. I let go of my cutlass and caught it with my bloody hand, striking him in the leg and putting him down on his knee. I swung once more, and the cutlass went across his neck with ease.

The blood flowed from the cut as his fingers slipped around his neck. No sound could escape his tongue. He gasped for air as he slumped over onto the wood, staining it with his blood. The shouting was starting to cease; the battle was over. A sea of red lay on the floor. I looked for Kimmie, hoping she had survived this battle. I found her sitting with her back to the railing. I gave an exclamation of admiration and gave her a wink. She stood, a grimace on her face as she stepped and had to catch herself.

‘Never too late for a battle scar,’ I said.

She gave a sad chuckle as she stepped over the bodies of both friends and enemies, keeping her eyes averted from their stiffness. ‘We will have to give ours a proper send-off, you know.’

‘Aye, it would be shameful if we didn’t. We abide by the code, and we shall be blessed. As for the Redcoats... Kimmie, just throw them overboard.’

‘Aye Cap’n.’

Kimmie started picking up the body of a Redcoat. With help from the helmsmen, she moved it towards the railing before stopping.

‘Cap’n, you’re going to want to see this,’ she said.

I looked at her puzzled. The ship had sunk; what was special about that?

I walked over to where Kimmie stood and looked at the deep blue. Except it wasn’t. A circle was starting to form; black gunpowder contrasted the blue. This was the second time. Another black ring. I couldn’t ignore this one – or stay silent about it. Murmurs of surprise and worry began to stir from the beaten and battered crew. Superstitions ran far and wide with the sea. Even I believed some of them. Even the black spot.

‘Right, quickly now. Unfurl the sails, bring up the anchor and drop the Redcoats. We shall sail with haste,’ I told the Boatswain and Bowman.

Their looks of worry stayed on their faces as they carried it out. The sea splashed with Redcoats. The sails had been dropped and caught the wind. There wasn’t the calm breeze of the morning; the afternoon had come and with it, a gust of chaos. Yet, there was an issue: the anchor. It wouldn’t rise. It was all we needed. The circle was perfect now. Unbothered by the waves, it had captured

the ship, keeping it inside. The crew's worry grew. So did mine, but I had to keep a strong face. I ran over to help with the anchor. It truly would not budge. *Shit.*

I let go of the rung. We were not moving. Tortuga was so close, the perfect haven for us. I walked over to the railing and stared into the darkening water, picturing Tortuga and its lawless land where we could have done anything. A flash caught my eye. Something had moved in the water. It couldn't have been a Redcoat, they were dead. No, this was bigger than that. This was something so much bigger. Another flash of white played with my vision. I saw this one more clearly now. It looked like a tentacle. A massive tentacle, a ring of black, and sitting ducks. I couldn't help but laugh.

It was real. The stories were true, and I wouldn't be able to tell them myself. A loud groan shook the boat. Kimmie and the cadets looked at me for answers and I just laughed back. The tentacle began to snake its way up the side of the ship, wood creaking under the weight. I still couldn't see the face of this beast. It reached the railing and slid over. Kimmie and the rest of the crew watched in horror as the tentacle kept going. One more came from the other side, and it pushed us down. Water filled the holes left by the battle; we were going to sink at this rate.

'Cap'n, tell it to me straight. How fucked are we?'

'Aye, we are fucked. There is no getting out of this one, Kimmie. So better enjoy the last ride of your life,' I laughed at her. I had made peace with the fact that this was the end, and I couldn't think of a better way to go out than to this ferocious beast that didn't even need to show its face to produce fear. I watched as the tentacles started to crack the wood. I touched the large tentacle and felt its slimy, smooth skin. I still couldn't wrap my head around its size. The fact that this beast had four more tentacles of this size, not to

mention its head or mouth...

The creaking wood became louder as it was pulled down further. I had to concentrate on keeping balance. Some splashes of water could be heard from overboard, from those in the crew who would rather face the wrath of the sea than this beast. I couldn't blame them. I would have done the same in my early years. But here I stood on my own ship, watching it break, yet the urge to run never came. I had feelings of calmness and contentment. I had sailed for too long; the seas had decided that it was time for me to retire.

I looked over to Kimmie. Her face was as serious as ever; I knew she would never run. If I went down, she would go down with me, kicking and screaming. I gave her a nod and spoke.

'Just like old times, you and me against the world. This time, I don't think we're making it out of this.'

'Aye Cap'n, don't go expect'in me to save your ass this time,' Kimmie laughed. 'Too busy saving my own.'

I settled on a big toothy grin as a third tentacle came up the side of the ship and gripped the wood, snapping it where it laid. This beast really liked playing with its food. I felt the ship get lower and the sea rise around us, the black circle still as perfect as ever. The beast produced another tentacle. This one finished the job, and I was knocked off my feet as it split the ship in two. A deep, guttural bellow rang out from beneath us. The water shook and rippled, yet that circle remained unchanged. It was coming with speed as the bellow became silent and rang out again, this time much louder as the head of the beast emerged.

Its head was bigger than the ship itself. I finally caught my footing and stood up again, staring it down in its soulless, pitch-black eyes as it stared back. Its skin was the same colour as its ten-

tacles – bone white – and the same glossy, slimy texture. Its mouth was huge. It glanced at Kimmie and I as though we were nothing. Taking the other half of the ship, it flung it into the distance with ease, its weight and size not an issue. I had to admit, it lived up to its name. The other half came down with a crash and a wave of water shot upwards. We weren't special, we were just this thing's lunch. It lifted the part of the ship that we were standing on and held it up. It was still toying with us. I rubbed my hands together and threw off my jacket. This was the most fun I had had in ages. Kimmie still had her look of seriousness, but it had softened a little. I thought she was finally grasping the situation and what it truly meant.

As it held us up, I looked down to the creature and saw into its mouth. Different bits of wood and torn pieces of cloth could be seen. It ate the ship whole. No one ever said *that* in the stories. Its teeth were sharp, and it had many rows of them. *I wouldn't want to be impaled by them*, I thought to myself. Kimmie had joined me in looking into what would be the death of us, and had an expression of disgust on her face.

'I thought it would at least be pretty looking, and not like Ol' Finn's mouth. Well, I guess I don't get to choose,' Kimmie said.

As the tentacles let go, I felt the rush of the wind in my hair and the lightness in my feet. The rows of teeth grew closer.

'Enjoy the meal, ya beastie. I won't make it that nice,' I said as we entered the mouth.

I could smell the wood in its teeth, the salt on its breath. It smelt as though someone had left fish out for days. I watched as the light disappeared; the beast closed its mouth. We were in darkness. So, this was what was chosen for me in the end. A bit on the nose. I laughed one last time.

# From the Darkness

Eleanor Hall

Eleanor Hall is a writer from Barnsley currently studying at the University of Lincoln. In her spare time, she enjoys reading.



The hallway is dark when I enter but, in the stillness, I can sense the disruption that marks the end of my time. Of course, I had hoped that I would have longer, weeks if not months. Don't we all? But my hope curdles as I see the latch of my door broken and lying at my feet. Stepping lightly, I prepare myself for the carnage that I'm no doubt about to find. My work, they must have come looking for it. I've known this time would come, but even with that knowledge I find myself shaking, unwilling to step any further. One deep breath in. One out. Then I must go in; I must look. They have chosen a night when my daughter is absent and for that, at least, I am grateful. Perhaps this means that she will not be punished for my crimes. My initial instinct is to run to her, to try to get her out of the city. But I know that that would be futile. They would only find me again and I would be placing her in more danger.

Taking great care not to make any noise, I push open the heavy, grey door. The usually pristine concrete block that is flat 4B has been ransacked. Everything I own has been tossed around like so many toys. Plates smashed, papers strewn everywhere, stuffing coating the floor like a heavy layer of dust. I close the door behind me, more out of habit than for any illusion of safety. The fluorescent lights above me flicker slightly as I make my way down the hallway and towards the living quarters. This has been my home for over fifteen years, the place where I have built my life, and now it is almost unrecognisable to me.

Cushions from the sofa are strewn all over the floor, the seams ripped open, and pieces of glass and ceramic litter the carpet from where cups and plates have been thrown. I step around the mess, careful to leave no sign of my presence in the slim hope that I

may still be able to escape. If I can find my work, maybe I can get out. There are ways and means, dangerous though they are. A plan begins to form in my head, a budding bloom of hope that stops my knees from shaking and my breath from becoming shallow. If they've moved on, I could do it. I could get Theodosia and run. But first I must get my work, if they don't have it already.

I move into the kitchen. Jars of sauce and tins of vegetables litter the floors and the countertops. The white linoleum is stained orange, and I dance around to avoid leaving any footprints. Looking up, my stomach drops. There it is. The loose ceiling tile has been pushed back to reveal pipes and wiring. So, they found it after all. That changes things.

No longer bothering to hide my tracks, I rush into the bedroom I call mine. No time now to collect anything other than the basics. No use in being sentimental when it's my life on the line. The dagger that I keep under my bed has been taken, as well as the emergency money that was wedged behind the bedframe. No matter, I have enough on my person to get us out and once the city was far behind, the money would have been less than useless anyway. Scrambling around the room, I pick out any clothes that I can find and throw them into a bag.

Theodosia is staying at a friend's and that will need to be my first stop. From there, we will take a bus to the front gates in an attempt to throw them off. Tracking back through to the docks will take more time but it will be more unexpected too. With all their resources, I need to think carefully. It's a fine line I must now tread. Move too fast and I am more certain to make a mistake, but the longer the game goes on the more likely that they will win. One wrong move and not only will my life be on the line, but hers too. If they catch me trying to leave with her, there is no doubt they

will interrogate her. The thought makes my stomach turn. It's not something that I can ever risk.

Before I leave, I pick up the landline. Calling my sister is another risk. Anyone could be listening. But she is our only hope of getting out alive and so it's a risk that I have to take. With any luck, the two of us will be out of the city by tomorrow morning. In a few days we'll be far out of their reach. I may not have spoken to her these past fifteen years, but she is my blood. She won't be happy about it, but she is the only one who understands the gravity of what I've been doing. She will take us in. She'll have to.

I dial the number, remembered after all these years, and wait for the call to pick up. Several rings and I begin to panic, my head throbbing like an infected tooth. If she doesn't answer, then I'll have to make another plan – one that would have a much lower chance of success. Ten more seconds and I begin to sweat. At any moment someone could walk in, or the call could be intercepted. Just as I'm about to hang up I hear a click and breathing on the other end. A wave of relief so strong washes over me that I could almost mistake it for being free.

'Andy?'

My voice comes out as a hoarse whisper, fear and relief both fighting for air.

'Andy, are you there?'

I can still hear breathing on the other end, but no voice answers me. Just as I am about to speak again, a crackled answer comes through the phone.

'Diana, is that you?'

The voice is not one that I recognise, but if they know me then perhaps they are a friend of my sister's. It has been years, maybe by now she even has children of her own.

'Yes. Yes it's me. I need help.'

A long pause follows each rasping breath, until I can no longer bear it.

'Too late.'

The phone clicks again, all pause and no more breath. I go to dial again, assuming there has been a mistake, before I hear the familiar squeak of the door opening.

Followed by footsteps, fast approaching.

# We Drank Champagne but Tasted Blood

Louise Sawyer

Louise Sawyer is a writer from Yorkshire. She is currently studying a BA in Creative Writing at the University of Lincoln. She specialises in writing mysteries for children, with a touch of the historical. When not writing, she can either be found reading or wandering up a hill.

It looks different now. And not in a good way. It catches me off guard – but it has been fifty years since I last came here. Why was I expecting it to look the same? This is the place where I grew up, where I learned to live, to love. And yet, it is a stranger.

The school was one of the most prestigious buildings around, regal and proud on top of the cliff; now it is a pile of weathered bricks and twisted vines. The paint is peeling, the weeds are grasping the sky, and any shred of dignity it once clung to has long gone.

I shuffle my way into what was the courtyard, taking care on the uneven ground. The distant echoes of forgotten youths rush around me, cheers soaring into the air like birds, and cries bringing them plummeting down again. The abandoned tennis balls of early morning practices, broken pencils strewn aside, lost treasures of lives passed; they are still here, buried under half a century of memories.

When I left this place, as shattered as the remnants of the fountain in front of me, I vowed I would never come back. There were too many ghosts here, sly spirits hiding around every corner. But then, when exploring the attic with my granddaughter, I found an old photo album. The surge of memories drowned me, that familiar, aching pain of loss, and I found myself treading the steps of my teenage self. I broke my promise and ended up back here.

As kids – for despite all our anguish and pretences, that is what we were – there was a spot my friends and I would go to. Overlooking the beach, it was close enough to hurry back up to school in case of an emergency, but far enough away to be hidden from the view of beady-eyed teachers. It was our favourite spot. It was also the place where Sharyn died.

There were once five of us making this journey, running and yelling, tripping over one another in our haste. Now, there is only me. The spot is further away than I remember, like the end of a rainbow – there but never quite attainable. I soldier on. As the summit nears, my breath hitches. I cannot go any further. I lean against a gnarled tree, watching the waves crash on the rocks below.

We carved our initials into this tree, one summer night in our fourth year. ‘Living proof that we were here.’ They are gone now, the tree hiding its scars beneath mossy bandages. The living only last so long.

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The torchlight bobbed in front of me, casting eerie shadows from side to side. The sun was just disappearing on the horizon, sending a fractured haze of pinks, reds, and golds spinning across the glittering sea. Below us, somewhere on the beach, came the low hum of voices, the gentle strum of a guitar. The party had started.

‘Are you sure this isn’t against the law?’ Ruth mumbled over the strand of hair she was chewing. With every twig snap, and owl hoot, she jumped. Ruth hated breaking the rules, which is why we had put her as lookout – not that she was doing a very good job.

‘A crime is only a crime if you get caught,’ Lois said sagely, as if she was the font of all knowledge and not, in fact, a teenage girl.

‘I’m not sure a judge will see it the same way,’ Martha said, with a sideways glance at Ruth. The younger girl squeaked, shuffling closer towards me.

I pulled my coat tighter around me, focusing on the bobbing light wobbling between Sharyn’s teeth. A pair of compasses glinted in her left hand. On the walk up, I ignored Lois and Martha’s

squabbling, concentrating on nothing but the telltale tug of thrill near my stomach. Now we were here, I could not remember why I thought this was a good idea. Shadows leapt around us. The thrill in my stomach turned into a stab of nausea. Maybe Ruth was right.

‘Just hurry up and get on with it,’ I said.

Sharyn spat the torch out and threw me a look, but did not pick up the pace. ‘You aren’t the only one who wants to get to the party, Bonnie.’

By the time we had finished, the sun had fully set, and our faces shone like moons in the torchlight. We stood there, arm in arm across the clifftop, staring out across the void. The crack of a burning log rippled through the air. We hurried down the cliff to the beach, sure-footed and steady, despite the darkness. The smell of smoke as the bonfire crackled mixed with the saltiness of the sea, and a gull cried overhead. My friends and I sat around, talking and laughing as we planned our futures.

‘We should go to Paris,’ Martha suggested around a mouthful of melted marshmallow. ‘For real this time, not just a holiday.’

A murmur rippled around our small circle. Lois jumped to her feet, dragging a giggling Ruth with her.

‘Ahh, Paris,’ she said, in a bad imitation of a French accent. ‘The city of love. The city of adventure.’

‘I could draw every day.’ Sharyn flicked a shell into the fire. ‘And Ruthie could play her music, and Martha design her dresses and—’

Lois dropped Ruth and pulled me up, interjecting as she spun me around in the soft sand. ‘We can dance under the Arc de Triomphe and eat cheese all day long.’

The fire sparked the dreams until it engulfed them. Pillars of hope reduced to ash.



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Feeling cold, I leave my post by the tree, and head back towards the school. This time, I am not alone. I reach out my hands, half-hoping for the grasp returned. Instead, it is memories that tickle my fingers, of a girl who never grew up, and a girl who never got the chance to.

As I round the corner, the school becomes visible. I cannot go inside – the memories are stronger, concentrated without the open air to waft them away. Instead, I seek shelter in the walled garden. There is a tree in the corner, much bigger than I remember, but recognisable from the way the branches twist around each other in a warm embrace. At the base, hidden under a tangled mess of weeds, sits Sharyn’s memorial stone. Nettles kiss my hands with poisoned tongues as I rescue the stone from its organic cage. It is cracked and faded, and covered in lichens, but in my mind it is still as vivid as the day we placed it.

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Sharyn had been dead for exactly one week. The four of us sat in our dormitory, none of us speaking, but none of us wanting solitude either. The only sound was the rhythmic thud of a tennis ball against the ceiling as Lois threw it up, and down, up, and down. It was she who broke the silence.

‘We should do something.’

‘I’m really not in the mood for a party,’ Martha said. She was lying on the floor, reading an old magazine. She had not turned a page in over an hour.

‘No, I meant for Sharyn. We should do something to remember her by.’

A cold silence squeezed the air out of the room. I did not want to remember. I wanted to forget. Remembering was keeping me awake at night, a thrumming torture as I relived those final moments again and again.

‘I think... I think that would be nice,’ Ruth said, the first words in a week. Without question, we obliged.

We settled on a stone; something small but permanent, and we chose the walled garden with its apple trees and quiet seclusion. No one wanted to venture up the cliff. Not so soon.

Lois and I found the biggest stone we could, and half carried, half rolled it into position. Martha gathered flowers into a hasty bouquet, upsetting a gardener’s hard work, and laid them to rest. A splash of colour against the dismal grey life had handed us. Ruth procured some chalks and a piece of paper out of her pocket.

‘We can’t write it in chalk, it’ll wash off!’ Martha said. She was leaning against Lois, eyes red-rimmed, hair a matted mess.

‘But I have a whole thing planned. It’s the only solution with the amount of words we need to write. Unless we find a bigger rock.’

‘No!’ The cry from Lois was loud and sudden, enough to make us jump. Nervous energy spooled over, and we were laughing. Laughing because our friend was dead, and it was ridiculous. Laughing because we were children and that is what children do.

In the end I scratched Sharyn’s name into the stone, the way she carved our initials into the tree. It was tough, exhausting work, but there was already blood on my hands. What was a little more?

I lower myself to the ground, sitting so I am facing Sharyn's stone. It will be a struggle to get back up, but I find I do not care. I stopped caring the day Sharyn went over the cliff. I just got very good at faking, even to myself.

The sixth of October 1959. One month into our final year. Nine months until we could lose the scratchy skirts and cumbersome blazers, go to Paris and never look back. The date haunts me. It itches and bleeds, an old scar that never fades.

Tragedy tore our group apart. With Sharyn gone, a hole formed in our tight circle, letting the water in, thrusting us to opposite ends of the world. I have not spoken to Lois in over forty-five years. Every other Christmas, I receive a card from Martha, the postmark tracking her journey across the USA. I come across her name every now and then, in one of the fashion magazines she used to love.

And Ruth. Thirty years went by before we found each other again, a chance meeting in a crowded London street. I almost did not recognise her; grief had gifted her a spooky look, with hollowed out cheeks and haunted eyes, far from the young girl with the crooked smile I had known so well.

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It was warmer than usual for the time of year. The last few wisps of summer still gripped the school. Even the sea breeze, such a blessing during the summer months, did nothing to dispel the growing discomfort.

The five of us were lounging about outside, textbooks and pens discarded in the grass next to us. Really, we should have been

in class, but we had taken the liberty as fifth formers to “study” in the grounds.

‘I never thought I would wish for rain,’ Martha said, as she applied yet more tanning oil. ‘Though I suppose we’ve got to make the most of it.’

‘And I never thought I would see Ruth not only missing classes, but sleeping through them as well, yet here we are.’ Lois nudged Ruth with her foot, causing the latter to wake up with a groan, hair stuck to her face.

‘I’m going for a walk,’ Sharyn said, standing up. ‘Anyone want to come with?’

‘Are you mad? I don’t want to move an inch until I’m covered in a blanket of snow.’

I staggered to my feet. Lois was right; it was too warm to move, but I knew if I did not get up now, I *would* be sitting there until the snow blankets arrived.

Together, we walked up the familiar path, away from the school and up to the shady spot by our tree. It was a tough trek, the stillness of the air making it difficult to breathe. At least it was slightly cooler up here.

As we neared the summit, I leaned against the gnarled tree, turning to face the dollhouse-sized school. I squinted, trying to make out Martha, Lois, and Ruth. I could not but I waved anyway, knowing that upon our return, they would tell us they waved, and ask in excited whispers if we saw them. Somehow, it was a game we never tired of playing.

A yell behind me broke the still air.

I swivelled around, the sunlight reflecting off the sea momentarily blinding me. Sharyn was nowhere to be seen.

‘Bonnie.’

I looked down, a haunting realisation hitting me. One, two, three, four, five fingers, chipped red nail polish digging into the ground. We had painted them last week, choosing colours from the box stashed under Martha's bed.

'Bonnie!'

Sharyn's second shriek snapped me into action.

'I'm coming. I'm coming.' Falling to my knees, I crawled my way to the edge of the cliff, trying not to baulk at the thought of the drop. 'Just hold on.'

'Like that thought hadn't crossed my mind.' I imagined Sharyn's teeth gritted in exasperation. Instead, she was silent.

Ignoring the loud thrumming of blood rushing in my ears, I inched forward until I was peering into Sharyn's petrified face. I braced myself and flung out an arm. Sharyn's palm met my own.

'What happened?'

'I— I don't know. One minute I was—'

Nearby a rock tumbled down the cliff, smashing into the water below. We screamed.

'Just help me, please,' Sharyn whispered. A tear rolled down her cheek.

Her free hand scrabbled in the grass, trying to find something, anything, to grab onto. Her other hand squeezed mine, crushing my fingers together as I pulled. The ground was hard from lack of rain, leaving me kicking at it as I tried to dig my toes into stability.

'Help!' I screamed, hoping someone would hear. The seclusion of this place had always been its greatest asset. Now, I cursed our misfortune.

'Bonnie... Bonnie, I can't hold on much longer.' Sharyn's hand slipped over the edge of the cliff. My arm tugged. One wrong move and both of us would plummet to our deaths. I summoned

every ounce of strength gained from five years of P.E. lessons and pulled.

It was working.

‘Come on, Sharyn. I’ve got you.’

‘I can’t.’

‘You can. You’ve got this.’ She had to believe me. I needed her to believe me so I could believe myself.

‘HELP!’ The desperation tore the back of Sharyn’s throat into ribbons.

‘Nearly there.’ My arms hurt, shoulders burning with the pressure. But it was okay, we would get through this. I just needed to regain some energy.

‘Bonnie?’

‘Yes?’

‘You’ve stopped pulling. Is help here?’

My heart shattered at the hopeful rise in Sharyn’s voice.

‘No. No, I’m sorry. I just needed a rest.’

There was a pause, before Sharyn’s voice tiptoed over the clifftop. ‘Bonnie?’

‘Yes?’

‘Can you do that after? When I’m there too, and can rest with you?’

‘Yes. Sorry.’ I ground my teeth as a bird sat in our tree, trilling a song. Mocking us.

Sharyn stopped crying, instead kicking the cliff face, mirroring me with the ground. Neither method worked.

I thought it would be easy, pulling someone to safety. Adrenaline should have taken over, but gravity was against us. ‘Sharyn. Sharyn! My hands, I can’t—’

‘You can, Bonnie. Please. We’re almost there.’

*Funny*, I thought. *Sharyn is lying to me, the way I lied to her.*

‘Can’t you grab onto the side?’ I said. I felt as though I had been pulling for hours. Progress had to have been made.

‘I’m scared.’

Her hand slipped in mine, relieving some of the pressure in my fingers.

‘Me too.’ I closed my eyes, unsure what else to say. ‘My hands. They’re so sweaty.’

*She needs to know. Just in case.*

‘I know,’ she almost laughed. ‘I can feel it.’

*Doesn’t she understand?* ‘No, Sharyn, I’m losing grip.’

‘No, Bonnie.’ Her voice squeaked and her already clammy palms became oceans contained in my own. ‘You can’t. Please.’

‘Sharyn...’

The tears were back, streaming down Sharyn’s face. The salty tang on my tongue told me I had them too. ‘Once more, I think that’ll do it.’

Her hand slipped again, along with the last grain of hope I held.

‘I can’t.’

‘Please.’

‘I’m trying.’

‘Me too.’ Sharyn’s fingertips appeared over the edge of the cliff, digging into the dirt. Then they fell again, and the force pulled her other hand away.

‘Sharyn?’ I held her by her fingertips.

‘Yes?’ she said, just before I let go.

‘I’m so sorry.’

<><><>

'I'm so sorry.'

I stare at the stone in front of me. The stone is only here because of me. Only I know what happened that day. I should not have come here. I have spent my whole life trying to forget, throwing myself into the busiest places I could find, drowning the voices, *her voice*, in my head.

She is sitting across from me now, back resting against the stone. She is still dressed in her school uniform, the shirt untucked, the tie hanging loosely around her neck. The ink stain is still soaked into her blazer pocket, the one that would not come out, no matter what we tried. She smiles, one side of her mouth curling up. An idea. I had forgotten she used to do that. She is drawing, pencil flicking across the page. Is she drawing me? She looks up, our eyes meeting. But no, she stares through me, looking at something only she can see.

I watch the pencil dance across the page. It always calmed me to watch Sharyn draw, nimble fingers etching out masterpieces. But there is something wrong. This does not calm me, not anymore. Her hands. Her hands are red raw, fingertips bleeding. She leaves little trails on the paper, but she does not seem to notice. She just keeps sketching.

I sit there, our feet touching, as she draws, and I remember.



# Best Kept Buried

Tamsyn Reynolds

Tamsyn Reynolds is a thriller and horror writer from Norwich. She is currently working towards her BA in Creative Writing at the University of Lincoln. When she's not typing away at her desk or reading thriller novels, she enjoys curating the perfect music playlist for any occasion.

I wish I'd never touched the garden that day. I could've lived without knowing what my mother did. It's selfish, I know, but living in ignorance is sometimes best. It's now something unspoken between the two of us; I know what I saw, she knows what I saw, and I am helpless in it all.

Some things are best kept buried.

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*Two weeks ago*

I wipe my forehead with the back of my hand and cringe at the sweat that comes away with it. The bin bag full of weeds beside me doesn't look like it can take much more weight, so I tie the handle into a knot and begin to haul it off the ground. If there was an award for the world's weakest teenager, it'd be on my bedroom wall. I settle with dragging the bag along the grass and dump it against the green bin.

My stomach makes another complaint of hunger, and I look at the kitchen window in longing. Mum's silhouette is visible through the windowpanes, bustling around the kitchen concocting something delicious. I sigh, kick at the grass and trudge back over to the weeds.

I'm only copying what Dad used to do at the old house with the shovel, cramming it into the soil and wedging it about. My shoulders ache and my tongue longs for a splash of water. I make a mental note to create an Indeed account tonight to get the job search under way. Hopefully then my gardening duties will stop.

The sun beats down on my neck and I feel myself becoming aggravated. I accidentally dig the blade of the shovel into a flower stem, and it flops onto the soil. With a growl, I haul the shovel away from the carnage and slam it into the grass with as much force as my body will allow me. The impact jolts me forward and I grip onto the handle to steady myself. A quick glance towards the kitchen window shows Mum didn't see the commotion.

I must've hit something hard underneath the grass because there's a crunch. I put my back into lifting the shovel up, but stumble backwards as I do. I land on my back and stare up at the clouds while trying to catch my breath. Laying by my side is the garden tool, which I roll my eyes at. Halfway towards sitting upright, I catch sight of the damage I've caused: falling over with the shovel has uprooted a chunk of grass and left a decently sized hole in its place. Mum is going to murder me; the garden is like her second child, and I'm under strict instructions on what not to touch. The lawn is one of those parts I'm not supposed to mess with.

Once I've hobbled onto my feet, clutching at my back like my elderly neighbour does, I peer down at the hole. What I hit was not a rock like I thought. I push my glasses up my face as if it'll help me distinguish what I'm looking at. It's no longer than a few centimetres and is too thin to be a rock. The off-white colour somewhat peeks through the mud surrounding it. I squat down, using my gloved hand to pluck it out of the hole. It's light and feels fragile to the touch, as though it could crumble at any moment. I hold it under the sunlight and frown.

I look from the shovel back to the hole again. The damage has already been done, so a little extra torn-up dirt can't hurt. I put my knees to the ground and start digging the remaining bits of dirt with my hands. The mud thins in layers, and I feel hard lumps

with my fingertips. More of the off-white fragments stare up at me, varying in length and width. Once my brain processes what my eyes are seeing, the sweat turns cold against my skin.

I propel myself back and scramble with my feet to get as far away as possible. All I hear is my heartbeat thudding against my chest. My throat constricts, airways heavy with a newfound weight. I feel hot and cold at the same time, the unsettling sensation overriding my body.

‘Are you all right, Ella?’ Mum’s voice calls from the back door.

I don’t have the strength to turn and face her. I can’t let her see what I have found. Something deep down in my gut is telling me I have to keep this to myself.

‘Yeah, I’m just taking a break.’ My voice sounds strained despite my efforts to maintain composure.

Mum is silent for a long while, enough that my arms break out into goosebumps. Then, ‘Dinner will be ready in a few hours. You might want to clean yourself up before you come back inside.’

The back door clicks shut, and I release a breath I hadn’t realised I was holding. The relief doesn’t last long, because I become aware all over again of what I have dug up. With the five individual pieces of bone laying side by side, I know then what they resemble.

Why the hell are there the remains of a human hand in our back garden?

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*Two hours later*

I kick my heel against the chair leg, concentrating on the rhythmic tapping on the wood. Mum hums to herself in the kitchen, putting the finishing touches on our plates. She’s still humming as she

brings through the plates and pops them down onto the table.

I pick up a glob of mashed potatoes with my fork and let it slide off of the utensil. My stomach churns at the thought of trying to eat anything. My body tenses as she takes a seat opposite me. It's just been the two of us in this house for a long while, and the only people to visit us from time to time are my grandparents. I can't imagine the two of them burying a hand in the garden, so it leaves the option of who could have done it very limited. I'm being ridiculous; this is my mother I'm doubting, the woman that's been there for me every day of my life. I should feel guilty for even questioning the kind of person she is, but I keep watering the doubt in my brain and it's growing past a point I can't ignore.

'Mum... can I ask you something?'

'Of course,' she says, not looking up from her food.

'Are we the only people to live in this house?' I try to sound as nonchalant as possible.

Mum frowns and glances at me. 'We bought this house right after it was built, so yes. Why do you ask?'

I lose grip on the fork in my hand, and it clatters onto the table. The noise makes me jump and I try to play it off with a nervous laugh. Mum gives me a concerned look, one that tells me she knows something is wrong and, in a few seconds, she's going to grill me about it. I pick up my glass of water with a shaky hand and take hasty sips, some missing my mouth and trickling down my chin.

I wipe my chin with my sleeve. 'It's for a survey my friend is doing.'

'What friend?'

'...Maya.'

A long stretch of silence follows. 'Does she have any more questions?'

I shove a piece of broccoli in my mouth to buy myself some time. Mum is still throwing me sceptical glances. I would too if I were in her position. I've committed to the deed now, so I might as well use the opportunity to my advantage.

'Have we ever had any work done to our house or the garden?'

Mum freezes midway to spooning potatoes into her mouth. 'What kind of survey is Maya conducting again?'

'It's about what kind of renovations people do to their houses. Boring stuff really, but she asked me to help.'

My forehead feels wet with perspiration but if I wipe it, I'll give myself away.

Mum hums and sets her cutlery to rest on the side of her plate. 'Let's see. The bathroom was renovated about seven years ago and we've done a bit of redecorating. Not anything major, it's not an old enough house for that.'

'What about outside?' I catch myself leaning forward in my seat, elbows on the table. I fold my arms and relax my posture.

'We had concrete all throughout the back garden when we moved in, but it's grass now. It's a pain to look after, but concrete is just so dull. You loved playing in the garden when you were younger.' A soft smile spreads across her lips at the memory.

There is absolutely no way she had anything to do with the hand in our back garden.

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*Later that evening*

I tap my nails against my desk, staring at the list of recruiting part-time jobs on my laptop screen. A text chimes through, and I pick up my phone to swipe at the message. It's a picture from Dad, of

the sunrise against the backdrop of a clear, glittering ocean. I type a response: *I'll come visit soon.*

I've said those words so many times their meaning has lost all value. His reply comes in quick, but I've set my screen face down onto the desk. Whatever he's said, it won't change the hurt I've been carrying for the past few years. Divorce is common nowadays, I understand that, but moving halfway across the world feels like he's gloating how much better his life is without me.

My bedroom door flies open, smacking against the doorstop on the wall. I startle out of my seat and whirl around, my legs hardly supporting my weight. Mum strides through the open door and comes to a stop halfway into the room. Her eyes are wide and dilated, her breathing unsteady as though she sprinted her way here.

'What's wrong?' I ask. My hands clutch the top of my chair.

'What did you do to the garden?'

I want to defend myself, to say I have no idea what she's talking about. Instead, my mouth hangs open and I blink stupidly at her.

'It was an accident. I fell over and—'

'Fell over? It looks like you dug a massive hole in the grass and chucked a little soil on top to disguise it.'

I hang my head in shame. I tried as best as I could to hide my tracks, but I didn't have much time in case Mum decided to come outside again. The thought of bringing the bones inside was horrifying and I couldn't exactly replant the grass, so I panicked. If I'd been quicker on my feet, maybe I could have blamed it on an animal. Lying has never been a talent of mine; I almost crumbled at the dinner table trying to formulate a lie, and even then, it was obvious something was up.

'I'll pay for the damage once I get a job, I promise.' I point at my laptop, trying to show her I'm telling the truth. She doesn't follow my pointed finger, just continues to stare at me as though

I've strangled a cat in front of her.

'You can't... I told you to dig out the weeds around the side of the garden and go over the soil. Why were you digging up the grass?'

'It was an accident—'

'I don't want you gardening anymore. I'll do it myself from now on,' she says. She runs a hand through her dark hair. 'Don't touch the grass again. Do I make myself clear?'

I nod my head so fast I get a cramp in my neck. I get the sense she wants to say more by the fact that she hasn't immediately stormed back out, but she doesn't utter another word. After a few more beats of silence, she backs out of the room and closes the door behind her.

I slump into my chair and put my hands on my head. My mum isn't an overreactor; whenever something goes wrong, she usually responds in a collected manner. Shouting has never been her thing. She's always valued communication more. I've never seen her react that way before. It's as though a different person came out, disguised under the mask of her face but flipped on the inside.

There is a possibility she had something to do with the hand in our back garden.

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*One week later*

The hand appears in my dreams. It appears when I'm zoned out during the day. When I'm washing the dishes by the kitchen window, I have visions of the bony skeleton crawling across the grass. Its presence consumes every one of my thoughts, no matter how



hard I try to push it down. There has to be a reasonable explanation, other than my mother being responsible for burying a human hand. What nauseates me the most is that there is a body somewhere that the hand used to be connected to.

I have no choice but to confront her.

The stairs creak beneath my weight, disrupting the surprise of my arrival into the living room. Light chattering from the characters on the TV plays in the background, but Mum is tapping away at her phone and regarding it no attention. My presence in the room seems to go unnoticed and I take a few seconds to compose myself as I wring my hands together behind my back.

‘Mum?’ I say, my voice so quiet I hardly hear it myself.

I get a hum in response, an acknowledgment that she’s somewhat listening. Her attention is still trained onto her phone screen, meaning she doesn’t see the fear masking over my face.

I clear my throat. ‘Last week, when I was doing the gardening...’

This piques her interest as she looks away from her phone and raises an eyebrow at me.

‘I found something. I didn’t want to say anything, I didn’t know how to, but I can’t keep it to myself anymore.’

‘What are you talking about?’ She crosses her arms over her chest, and I already feel the disapproval radiating off her.

‘The hole I dug in the grass.’

‘The one you said was an “accident”?’

‘Please don’t get angry. Can you just let me show you?’

Mum sighs and massages her temples with her fingertips. A stretch of uncomfortable silence follows, and I rub my socks against the carpet. She gives a reluctant nod of the head and my heart hammers in my chest.

I lead her into the back garden. It's cloudy today, as though the sun is being cowardly and doesn't want to watch the scene that's about to unfold. I wish I'd never let my curiosity get the better of me and pretended I didn't hear that crunch under the grass. We stop at the edge of the hole, now with the dug-up dirt dumped on top in my attempt to fix it. I make a motion with my hand to tell Mum to wait there and traipse over to the shed. My hands are shaking as I undo the bolt over the door, and I have to suppress every urge to run back inside the house and lock myself in my bedroom.

Mum scoffs as soon as she sees the shovel in my hand. 'If you're about to do what I think you are, then you can stop right there.'

I position the end of the shovel in the dirt. 'I'll clean everything up again, I promise. I really have to show you this, Mum. Please.'

She throws her hands in the air and mutters something under her breath. 'I told you not to mess around in the garden again.'

'I know.'

I've had enough of waiting for approval. My body protests at the motion of digging, but I ignore it. Mum's raised voice is distant. The only sound I'm concentrated on is hearing that same crunch I did a week ago. I steel myself for the sight of bone once more. My breathing comes in hard from the physical effort and from the anxiousness of the conversation I'll have after I show her what's been lurking in our garden for who knows how long. I don't know what my first question is going to be: did you have something to do with this, or where is the rest of the body?

I don't have to ask any questions, however. I drop the shovel to the ground and dig my fingers into my hair. Tears well in my eyes, from frustration or confusion or a combination of every-

thing. Mum's hand rests on my shoulder and I feel myself being pulled away from the hole beneath us. She's speaking to me, but I can't hear a single word.

The bones are gone.

'Ella? What's wrong?'

I meet her concerned gaze and study those blue eyes I've found comfort in for the past fifteen years of my life. Our conversation in my bedroom that night, when she was angrier than I'd ever seen her before, flashes through my mind.

My mum is responsible for the hand in our back garden.

And I have no way to prove it.

# Elixirs and Vines

Lilly Geddes

Lilly Geddes is a British writer focusing on psychological realism and urban fantasy. She is studying a BA (Hons) in Creative Writing at the University of Lincoln. Alongside working part-time at Windmill Farm Carvery in Hykeham, she finds time for playful antics with her cats and chinchillas.

Gravel scuffed Cassie's round-toe Oxfords as she wandered through the city streets during her lunch break. She paused, wiping her brow while her feet dithered on the spot. Sweat pooled into the collar of her chiffon blouse as she ducked into the shade of a nearby bus stop. Even in the pale shadows, the heat clung to her like a second skin. Her office was only a few streets away; the thought of the breeze from the air conditioning tickled the back of her neck. The unopened bottle of champagne on her desk called to her. The temptation of sipping down a glass of those smooth bubbles made her tongue twitch. A growl erupted from her stomach in protest. She sighed and checked the time on her phone – ten minutes past twelve. Cassie groaned as her sister's name, Verity, lit up the screen. Her finger hesitated over the answer button, torn between the weight of hearing bad news and the desperate need to know what Verity wanted. She swiped up and put the phone to her ear.

'Hey, you got a second?' Verity asked, her voice calm but weary.

'Yeah, sort of. My phone is on low battery. What's up?'

'Mum's been asking for you again.'

Cassie pinched the bridge of her nose. 'How's she doing?'

'Same as yesterday,' Verity sighed. 'Same as the day before. You know how it is. She's tired but still pretending she's fine though. Classic Melissa.'

'Of course she is.'

'Cass, she's not fine.' Verity's voice sharpened. 'She's putting on a brave face. She doesn't even argue when I take over the chores anymore.'

‘Oh...’

‘And now? She can barely get out of bed. You’d know this if you visited like you promised. You really need to come over this weekend. She needs you.’

‘I wish I could, Ver. But I’ve got a huge project, the deadline is Monday, and I can’t shift it.’

‘Again?’ Verity scoffed. ‘Seriously?’

‘It’s not like I’m doing this for fun. It’s my job. You know how hard I worked to get here.’

‘And Mum was the one who sacrificed so much to get you there.’

‘You think I don’t know that? You think I don’t want to be there?’

‘Then be here.’

‘It’s not that simple.’

‘It is though.’ Verity’s voice raised an octave. ‘You make it complicated because you don’t want to deal with—’

‘That’s not fair,’ Cassie snapped.

‘What’s not fair is me being the one she leans on every day while you...what? Hide behind your work, your big clients and marketing projects?’

‘That’s not what I’m doing.’

‘Then prove it. Show up. For once, show us you care.’

Her phone vibrated against her cheek. She tapped the screen, and the battery icon dropped to ten-percent charge. The long silence lingered, and a knot formed in Cassie’s stomach.

‘I can’t this weekend.’ She winced at her reply. ‘Phone is going to die so I’ve got to go.’

‘Fine.’ That one word cut through Cassie. ‘But don’t wait until it’s too late to decide Mum matters.’

The line went dead. Cassie shoved the phone in her pocket and dragged a hand over her face. Cars honked over the occasional chatter of pedestrians walking by. She ventured further down the street, avoiding the pigeons that fluttered between scattered crumbs and the shadows of passing feet. Cassie took a deep breath and looked around for somewhere to ease her rumbling stomach.

A dainty building wrapped in climbing lianas and a forest-green sign above the door caught her eye. The sign read *Elixirs and Vines* above a golden lotus flower logo. The soft glowing light through the window offered a promise of more than overpriced lattes and avocado toast. As she stepped through the door, a comforting scent of vanilla and coffee washed over her. Antique chandeliers hung between draping vines and wooden beams. Their glass crystals cast kaleidoscopic patterns over her navy-blue leggings as she made her way to the counter. She passed the array of people laughing and chatting around her and glanced over the options on the menu. Cassie couldn't help but reach out as if to touch the chalk lotus flowers. Drawn with such delicacy, she half-expected her fingers to brush against velvety petals. A barista with a gentle expression and a deep red pixie cut stood behind the till.

'Welcome to Elixirs and Vines,' the barista greeted her in a soothing voice. 'I'm Faye. What can I get you today?'

'What would you recommend?' Cassie asked, still looking over the choices.

'Personally, I just love the Lotus flower tea. I suggest it to all our customers.'

Cassie nodded, placed her phone on the counter and dropped her small backpack from her shoulders. As she fumbled around looking for her purse, Faye held up a slender hand.

'The first one is always on the house,' Faye said, reaching for a

teapot. 'Take a seat, and I'll bring it over to you.'

'Thank you,' Cassie replied, picking up her phone again. It buzzed and the screen went black as the battery died.

Cassie spotted a secluded table in the corner by a large bay window. She settled into the nook and rummaged through her bag again for her phone charger.

'Ugh,' she grunted. 'It must be back at the office.'

She dropped her bag to the floor, allowing the cushions on the bench to envelop her in a cocoon of comfort. In no time at all, Faye came from behind the counter with Cassie's tea. Her movements were graceful and elegant. She had high cheekbones and soft lips. Her eyes drew Cassie in. They were a soft grey, shifting in hue between the twisting tendrils of steam, like the sea before a tempest.

'Thank you,' Cassie said. 'It's beautiful in here.'

'I'm glad you think so. I put quite a bit of work into this place.'

'You seem to have many customers,' Cassie commented.

Her eyes transfixed on one gentleman in particular. He sat at the mahogany bar along the back wall. His long, curly hair tapered over a bold multi-coloured jacket that he'd paired with bright blue shoes.

'Some of these people have been here almost as long as I have.' Faye nodded towards a woman in a nineteen-fifties polka dot dress. Cassie watched as the lady sipped her coffee, her coiffed hair framing her face.

'I can see why. Who'd ever want to leave?' Cassie said with a smile.

'Well, enjoy your tea,' Faye replied as she walked away.

Cassie blew on the silky liquid before taking a sip. It scalded her lower lip, but the sweet aftertaste faded to a light feeling on



her tongue. The steady pull of her to-do lists, dates and deadline melted away like the sugar in her tea. Cassie traced the rim of her cup with a distracted finger. Faye met her eye with a small smile. A group at a nearby table were engaged in an animated discussion about the latest swing dance craze. In another corner, some men played cards. One of them had his sleeves rolled up of his denim shirt with a golden chain peeking from under his collar. The other two had cigarettes balancing between their fingers. They slapped their hands on the tabletop as they laughed, sending ash clouds swirling around their heads like halos gone astray.

The leathery leaves of a potted fiddle-leaf fig obscured Cassie's view of a makeshift library in the corner of the café. She slid off her seat and walked towards the teetering stack of books that flanked the walls. Crouching down, she hovered a finger along the titles until she paused over a name she recognised. The cover of *The Odyssey* appeared worn and faded as if the book itself bore the years of its epic journey. The texture of the gilded lettering on the spine were rough and familiar on her skin. Cassie closed her eyes. Her mother's rich voice echoed, reading bedtime stories of Odysseus as Verity snored beside her. She had watched their mother's bright eyes scan the pages while hugging her cheek to her pillow. The words had conjured dreams in which Cassie, Odysseus and the crew braved the wild seas and battled monsters. Much like the lure of the lotus-eaters, to Cassie, those nights were endless and safe.

Cassie stood from her crouch with the book in hand but as she spun around, she tangled herself in the fig tree.

'Oh, motherfu—' Cassie toppled over and grabbed her throbbing toes after she'd banged them on the plant pot.

Ice cubes clattered across the table next to her. She'd knocked

into a woman as she fell, yanking a rouge-stained straw from their lips. The woman's manicured fingers still clung to the half empty glass as liquor trickled over her hands.

'I'm so sorry,' Cassie said, scrabbling to get herself upright. 'I'll wipe it...'

The woman appeared frozen in motion, like a paused frame in an old film. Her shoulders sagged beneath her boxy jacket and oversized buttons.

'Hello?' Cassie asked, waving a hand in front of her vacant face.

The only sound the woman made was her black stiletto heels tapping together as she stared with half-lidded eyes. Cassie picked up *The Odyssey*, shaking off droplets of the spilled drink. Hobbling back to her seat, she peered over her shoulder with a frown. The book hit the table with a thud before Cassie clasped the Lotus flower tea in her hands. She recoiled from its cool touch. The cup rattled against the saucer as Cassie peered into it. She poked her lip that had only recently stopped tingling from where she'd burnt it. Unease crept through the crevices of her mind. It clung to the edges of her thoughts like a shadow just out of view. Tilting her head, her frown deepened. Cassie pushed the teacup aside and thumbed through the pages of the book. She flipped through each of Odysseus' trials. Fighting off the sirens, facing Charybdis and Scylla, and escaping the Lotus-Eaters. Her finger jabbed the page in the ninth book, skimming through lines of text.

'But there they were fain to abide among the Lotus-eaters, feeding on the lotus, and forgetful of their homeward way,' Cassie muttered.

Her head snapped up. The faces of those around her, once distinct and lively, began to blur into a muted tapestry of colour

and sound. They wore brittle smiles like spun sugar sculptures ready to shatter at the slightest touch. Cassie tried to shake the feeling, focusing on the rhythmic tapping of Faye's shoes against the wooden floor, but even that seemed off. The rapping slowed and quickened erratically, like a clock winding down.

'Biscuit?' Faye offered. 'The recipe is timeless.' She stood grinning with an intense stare, flashing her flawless teeth.

Cassie's hand hovered over the plate but a flicker of clarity in her fogged mind froze her mid-reach. Her pulse pounded in her ears. Pain emerged as minor quakes behind her temples. The magnetism of timeless pleasure seeped through her body and weighed down her limbs. She shook her head and pushed herself up off the chair. Flashes of her life bombarded her mind with relentless force. Playfighting with her sister, Verity. Posing for drunken photos with her friends. Pats on the back from her boss to congratulate her on bagging another big client. Her mother.

The headache turned into full-blown tectonic shifts threatening to split her skull apart. Cassie grabbed her phone, her backpack and stumbled forward. Each step towards the door was like wading through mountains of sand. Faye's gaze followed her. For a moment, Cassie's pain eased. In its place, a captivating voice urged her to stay. Cassie stilled, one foot stepping backwards, but her mother's face, frail and hopeful, etched itself in her mind. Faye's smile morphed into a sneer as Cassie threw the door open. Her feet met the pavement as she stepped out into the crisp night air. Her eyes adjusted to the darkness, confused about where the daylight had gone. She pulled out her phone, held down the power button, tapping the screen frantically.

'C'mon. Turn on. Come on!' Cassie urged.

The screen flickered, powering up to Cassie's surprise. The

battery icon blinked at three percent as she navigated to her messages with shaking hands. Missed calls and unread texts flooded the screen. Her sister's texts came in like a fist to her back, knocking the air from her lungs. Each message grew more frantic.

*It's Mum.*

*She's bad.*

*Please come and see her.*

And then, the last message.

*Where are you, Cas? It's been two days. Get home now!*

A fire burned through Cassie's muscles as she bolted through the city, her breath hitching as the world blurred into streak of neon and shadow. The saccharine scent of *Elixirs and Vines* clung to her skin. Sweat plastered strands of amber hair to her forehead. Her heart pounded in time with her footsteps, each beat driving her closer to her house, her car, her freedom. She ran through the darkness ahead with only the sparse lights from nearby houses illuminating her path. As she rounded the corner onto a narrow street, the recognisable pale cherry blossom tree towered over her, and she pushed her legs through the last stretch.

'Almost home,' she panted. 'So close.'

She dug through her backpack for her car keys. They jingled and hit the floor in her fluster. The cool ground scraped the skin of her palm as she stroked it in search of the keys.

'Gotcha!' she said, seeing the glint of silver from her teddy bear keychain.

Orange flares from the headlights lit up her driveway as she

unlocked the car. The night air was much cooler now, but the lingering heat wrapped around her like a suffocating blanket. She didn't slow until she reached the driver's seat, slammed the door and locked it tight. Only then did she let herself breathe, grazed hands trembling on the steering wheel as the artificial calm of the café gave way to raw, electric panic. The engine roared and the tyres left dust spiralling in their wake. Cassie's grip on the steering wheel stung her bleeding hands. She pressed down harder on the pedal, willing the car to go faster, as if speed alone could shrink the distance between her and her Mum. She barely noticed the scenery blurring by – the fields, the scattered houses, the familiar signs – her focus was only on her mother.

<><><>

The house was quiet. Cassie's footsteps tapped against the cobblestone footpath leading through the garden. She passed the climbing frame she used to play on with Verity. Weeds twisted their way up the metal poles, standing as witnesses of the years gone by. She smiled at the thought of playing pirates with Verity. She'd forced her sister to walk the plank, pushing her onto the grass until their mother saw how high they were jumping from. Melissa had collected large sticks for swords, joining the girls and dodging their attacks in gruelling battles. Once, Cassie had scabbled to the very top of the frame but fell off before she could shout, 'Land Ho!' The red plastic slide still had the crack in it from where Cassie had landed. The light clicked on as Cassie reached the front door, turning her old key in the lock.

'Hello!' Cassie bellowed as she entered. 'Anyone home?'

'Cas? Is that you?' Verity's head peered from around a door-

way.

‘I know it’s late—’

Verity launched herself at Cassie, pinning her in a tight hug. ‘You’re here!’

‘Where have you been?’ Verity asked, dragging Cassie down the hallway. ‘You didn’t answer my texts for two days. I was worried.’

‘It’s a long story. How is Mum? Is she...?’

‘No!’ Verity blurted out. ‘But I’m glad you’re here now. I don’t think she would have made it another day.’

‘Can I see her?’

‘Of course.’

The pair stopped outside their mother’s bedroom door. Verity faced her sister, her eyes glistening.

‘Just...prepare yourself.’ Verity took hold of Cassie’s hand and squeezed.

Cassie turned the door handle and let the dim light bathe her before pushing it all the way open. The beeping of medical machines pressed into her chest like a dull rhythmic hammer. Each measured and mechanical sound a reminder of time slipping away. Melissa lay wrapped in wires and blankets.

‘I’m here, Mum. I’m here now,’ Cassie whispered.

Melissa’s eyes fluttered open in their sunken sockets. Her breathing shallow, and she wheezed when she smiled at Cassie with cracked lips. Lifting her head, she tapped a skeletal finger on her cheek. Cassie leaned forward to give her a kiss, feeling the creases that stretched across her cheekbones.

Her mother smiled faintly, a look of calm settling over her as she whispered, ‘Thank you, Cassie.’

That night, Cassie stayed by her mother’s side. Faint hints of

marmalade and lavender clung to the blanket draped over the bed, weaving a bittersweet comfort as she buried her face in them. Melissa's limp hand, still warm in hers, anchored Cassie in the present for a moment longer. Her mother's face was peaceful – like she was already somewhere else, someplace gentle. Verity's hand on her shoulder offered understanding of their shared pain. Although Verity's eyes never held any pity, Cassie avoided her gaze. The time she'd spent organising interviews, creating billboards and ceaselessly typing seemed foolish now. She didn't want to let go, even as the stillness suffocated her. As she sat, numb, her thoughts drifted to the quiet hum of another place. The pull of ignorant bliss still lingered, deep and inviting. The memory of *Elixirs and Vines* brushed against her mind like a whisper. It tugged her toward something painless. A place where hours could melt away without thought, without memory. She shook her head, forcing herself back to the present, back to her mother's hand growing cold in hers.

# The Bernician Princess

Angharad Rhiannon

Angharad Rhiannon is a scriptwriter from Retford, Nottinghamshire, who specialises in historical fiction. You can often find her writing beside the Tennyson statue near the Lincoln Cathedral. Scripts that inspire her include Peter Shaffer's *Amadeus*, Dan Erickson's *Severance* and Jesse Armstrong's *Succession*. When she's not thinking about scripts, she's knee-deep in Byronic poetry.



Pronunciation Guide for Angharad Rhiannon's *The Bernician*

Princess

Aelchflaed – æl-fled – al-fled or ayl-fled

Aethelred – εθελ,rɛd – ethel-red

Bebbanburh – beb.bæn.burx – BEB-ban-burkh

Buthcaester – bu:ð.kæster – Booth-kaster

Coenred – kœ:n.red – Kurn-red

Dinogad – di.no.gad – DEE-no-gad

Eanfeld – æʌn.feld – ay-ah-felld

Ecgfrith – etʃ.friθ – ETCH-frith

Eoforwick – eə.vor.wɪk – EHoh-vor-week

Eostre – 'e:ɔstre – Ay-oh-streh

Leof – le:of – LAY-ov

Offa – offɑ – OH-fah

Osfryth – ɔzfrɪθ – OSS-frith

Oswiu – ɔs.wiu – OSS-wee-oo

Peada – pæda – Pay-ah-dah

Penda – pɛnda – Pehn-dah

Rheged – rɛgɛd – HREH-ged

Rieinmelth – ri.ɛin.melθ – REE-eyn-melth

Tiw – ti:w – Tee-w

WInwaed – win.wæ:d – WIN-wahd

Woden – wo:.den – WOH-den

Wulfhere – Wʊlf.hɛ:.re – wulf-hair-eh

## INT. FLADBURY CONVENT

705 A.D. AELCHFLAED OF BERNICIA (68) clad in white nun's robes with covered hair, an engraved wooden cross hanging round her neck, stalks down a long candle-lit hallway. Younger nuns step out of her way and incline their heads as she passes.

Hanging high on the wall above Aelchflaed is a tapestry depicting the Virgin Mary. Aelchflaed pushes a heavy wooden door open and steps onto a grassy lawn punctuated by wooden crosses.

In the middle of the lawn is a large yew tree, sunlight filtering through its needles. Above her head grey clouds gather; the silence is broken by the cawing of crows.

Focus dirt path.

At the far end of the graveyard is a tall holly tree sprinkled with berries, an empty patch of grass beneath it. Aelchflaed passes the tree, opening a small gate to the right.

The sound of wind rustling through the trees gives way to the rush of water.

AELCHFLAED V.O.

This is the will of Aelchflaed, princess of Bernicia. So help me by the Grace of God, a last testimony of truth. Judge it as you will.

Focus on her face, her eyes closing against the blustery wind. The sound of water fades into silence. She takes a deep breath.

AELCHFLAED V.O.

I am Aelchflaed, great  
grandaughter of Rhun  
of the House of Rheged.  
The last woman of my  
line. And I will not be  
sold, or used, or betrayed  
– again.

Aelchflaed exhales; opens her green eyes.

AELCHFLAED V.O.

I am my mother's daugh-  
ter.

CUT TO BLACK.

INT. BEBBANBURH CASTLE

654 A.D. A modest wooden chamber is lit by the flames from a small hearth. A simple table is cluttered with jewelry, fabric, and grooming tools. OSTHRYTH (8) runs a wooden comb through Aelchflaed's (17) long, red hair. She is a small, freckled girl with golden curls. Both girls wear deep blue kirtles.

OSTHRYTH

You look beautiful. Like  
Esther.

Aelchflaed smiles, looking down at the floor as she smooths her skirt.

AELCHFLAED

I am no Esther, leaf.

OSTHRYTH

But you will be queen.

AELCHFLAED

Yes. If God wills it and  
father needs it.

Aelchflaed turns, takes the comb from Osthryth's hand and puts it to one side. She grabs hold of her sister's hands.

AELCHFLAED

My dear Osthryth. It is  
not like the stories say.

Osthryth entwines their fingers.

OSTHRYTH

You do not want to be  
married?

AELCHFLAED

No, I do not.

OSTHRYTH

You could run away. We  
could run away together.

Aelchflaed laughs, pulling her hand from Osthryth's grasp to brush a stray lock of hair from her sister's face.

AELCHFLAED

And go where, my darling? To the forest? To the sea? The world is not kind. Not for girls.

Osthryth pulls a face. Looks down. Squeezes Aelchflaed's hand.

OSTHRYTH

What will you do, Aelchflaed?

Aelchflaed turns to the dark red overdress lying on the table.

AELCHFLAED

I will smile and greet him  
and be his bride.

She looks at Osthryth. Grabs her and pulls her into a hug.

AELCHFLAED

It is the way of men to  
fight and conquer. And it  
is we women who end up  
torn between...

She pulls away, cupping Osthryth's cheeks.

AELCHFLAED

...but it is up to us to decide  
what we do with the  
hand we are dealt. One  
day, you will have to make

your own choices. I pray  
your path will be easier  
than mine. But if it is  
not... Never forget – you  
come from a line of great  
women.

Osthryth nods, giving her sister a small smile.

#### AELCHFLAED

Now, help me dress. I  
only plan to marry once.

#### INT. TAMWORTH BURH

654 A.D. Torches light a large empty hall with beamed ceilings and carvings of Woden and Tiw. Shadows dance up the walls. The fireplace is surrounded by empty benches. A carving of King Offa stands beside a large throne. Mercian banners in blue and gold hang along the walls.

The hall is briefly lit by lightning. Thunderclaps echo; wind rattling the shutters.

Aelchflaed enters the hall dressed in a dark blue kirtle with a red overdress; golden brooches pin a fur lined cloak to her shoulders. She holds a small hawthorn branch in her hands. Behind her, carvings of the goddess Eostre decorate the wall.

PEADA (25) stands next to the throne. He has long blonde hair, a full beard, and is dressed in an embroidered blue tunic. He smiles as he sees Aelchflaed, holding out his hand.

#### AELCHFLAED V.O.

Peada paid the price Os-

wiu demanded. Took his  
God and his daughter's  
hand. And was given in  
return dominion over the  
5,000 families of South-  
ern Mercia.

Peada grasps Aelchflaed's hand and leans down to kiss her  
knuckles. She passes him the hawthorn branch, lowering her head  
respectfully.

#### AELCHFLAED V.O.

That fair warrior, son  
of Penda. The one who  
plotted to possess his  
good friend's sister and  
who betrayed both gods  
and family to get what he  
desired.

Aelchflaed looks at the throne.

#### AELCHFLAED V.O.

Penda. The slayer of  
five kings. Among them,  
Oswald, my beloved  
uncle. Sliced into pieces  
after Owestry, and staked  
out for birds to peck out.  
Until my father gathered  
them up and took them  
to Bebbanburh.

Aelchflaed turns to smile at Peada. He strokes her cheek.

#### PEADA

My wife.

She leans into his hand, holding it to her cheek. She places her hand on the cross around his neck.

AELCHFLAED

My brother's?

Peada nods, closing her hand around the cross.

PEADA

A gift of my conversion...  
Though, of course, you  
are the greatest gift of  
all. And this night, I will  
claim all of you.

Lightning flashes as she stretches to kiss his cheek. A clap of thunder sounds as Peada pulls her into an embrace.

A shutter blows open, snow following the gust of wind that sweeps into the hall.

Peada sighs and calls for a thrall. Two boys rush over to close the shutters.

PEADA

It would seem winter is  
upon us. This last sum-  
mer was far too mild.

AELCHFLAED

The cow's necks are thick-  
er than usual. The geese  
flew early. It will be a hard  
winter.



PEADA

So it seems. The rowan  
bloomed early, and they  
tell me the swine are gath-  
ering sticks.

Aelchflaed watches the boys trudging back to the corner of the room. They slump to the floor. She frowns.

AELCHFLAED

As Hosea says, 'As surely  
as the sun rises, He will  
appear; He will come to  
us like the winter rains,  
like the spring rains that  
water the earth'.

Peada chuckles, patting her head.

PEADA

Yes, and spring will bring  
forth new life.

He raises her chin with his left forefinger, gesturing with his right hand for the thralls.

PEADA

Bring the honey mead.

He continues gazing at Aelchflaed.

If we are to have a crop come spring, we must plough and seed the fields. And let no man disturb our honey-moone.

One of the boys appears with mead.

INT. BED CHAMBER

The room is separated from the hall by a red curtain, the wind still batters against the shutters and the curtains move slightly.

Peda lies asleep beneath furs and a wool blanket. Aelchflaed is awake. She is staring at the ceiling, her red hair loose around her. She touches her bitten lips, her fingers coming away bloody.

She glances at her sleeping husband.

AELCHFLAED V.O.

In his foolish haste, greed  
and arrogance, Peda had  
forgotten to calculate the  
price of virginhood. Had  
failed to understand...

She wipes her bloody fingers along his cheek.

AELCHFLAED V.O.

...a blood debt must al-  
ways be repaid in blood.

Peda stirs. She strokes his hair and soothes him back to sleep. Her tongue runs along her blooded lips as she closes her eyes with a heavy breath.

INT. BEBBANBURH CASTLE

653 A.D. A clenched jaw. KING OSWIU sits upon a large wood-

en throne with a crucifix behind him. He is wearing a green tunic, with grey furs pinned to his shoulders.

The doors open to reveal his daughter, Aelchflaed. Oswiu stands. She strides over to greet him, and he hugs her.

AELCHFLAED

News from the Kingslayer, father?

Oswiu pulls away, holding her cheeks in his hands.

OSWIU

My brave daughter... My daughter with the heart of a king. You are so like your mother.

He looks around the old hall, tapestries of battles and ancient kings hanging along the walls.

OSWIU

My blood has ruled these lands since Ida's time.

He turns back to his daughter, taking her hand.

OSWIU

But your mother's blood is older still... From Rieinmelth of Rheged, of the old kings of Britain.

He shakes his head. A smile crosses his face.

OSWIU

She grew tired of me –  
yes, she did – and trust-  
ed herself to the abbey.  
Preferred the abbey life  
to me. But there was a  
time when your mother  
was more of a king than  
I was.

Oswiu searches her face before kissing the top of her head.

OSWIU

And you, my daughter,  
are more a king than your  
brother ever will be.

AELCHFLAED

Father, what has hap-  
pened?

OSWIU

Peda, son of Penda.

(pause)

He has asked for your  
hand in marriage.

AELCHFLAED

Of course, you said no.  
He is a heathen. A brute.  
His father is a murderer.  
You said no.

OSWIU

Brute or not, you must  
marry him, Aelchflaed.

Oswiu turns her hand over, placing a dagger into her palm.

OSWIU

Peda is not his father. He  
is weak. His lust is strong.  
He is willing to be bap-  
tised in holy water just to  
have you.

AELCHFLAED

Father you cannot marry  
me to such a man. It's not  
just the gods he worships  
– he has no honour.

OSWIU

He is Penda's heir. And  
you, my daughter, will do  
your duty and end this  
bloodshed.

Osthryth runs into the hall, golden curls bouncing as her little legs carry her towards the throne. Her mother, EANFELD (30), a woman with delicate features and a kind face, chases after her. Osthryth giggles, grabbing Aelchflaed's skirts.

Aelchflaed catches her little sister and scoops her up, smoothing her hair as Osthryth plays with her necklace.

Aelchflaed looks up at her father and nods.

AELCHFLAED

I will do my duty.

INT. TAMWORTH BURH

654 A.D. Aelchflaed slips through the red curtains leading to her bedchamber in the early morning light, her brow furrowed, and her lips pressed into a thin line.

AETHELRED (10), a small boy with dark hair, sits alone at the foot of the throne playing with a wooden horse. Aelchflaed looks around to ensure no-one else is awake. She approaches the boy, crouching down beside him.

AELCHFLAED

Where are your parents,  
little one?

AETHELRED

Away.

AELCHFLAED

What is your name?

The boy looks up at her, placing the horse in his lap.

AETHELRED

Aethelred of Mercia.

AELCHFLAED

Son of Penda?

The boy nods.

AELCHFLAED

I am Aelchflaed. I am  
married to your brother,  
which means I am your  
sister now.

Aethelred nods, looking down at the horse on his lap.

AETHELRED

Aelchflaed daughter of  
King Oswiu and Riein-  
melth of Rheged. Prin-  
cess of Bernicia.

She sits down on the steps beside him. Looks at him. Her eye-  
brows raise.

AELCHFLAED

Yes, that's me.

AETHELRED

My new sister. My broth-  
er's wife.

AELCHFLAED

Exactly.

AETHELRED

Do you like horses,  
Aelchflaed?

AELCHFLAED

I do. There is freedom  
in riding. Do you like  
horses?

AETHELRED

My father was teaching  
me to ride, but he's gone  
away to fight. Again.

AELCHFLAED

He has.

AETHELRED

To fight your father.

Aelchflaed touches his arm. Focus on the wooden horse as he  
fiddles with it.

AELCHFLAED

Yes, our fathers are fight-  
ing.

She touches the small carved horse, her fingers tracing its edges.

AETHELRED

Do you have brothers and  
sisters – other than me?

AELCHFLAED

I do. In fact, I have a sis-  
ter around your age. Her  
name is Osthryth.



AETHELRED

Osthryth... That's a pretty name.

She smiles, nodding her head.

AELCHFLAED

She's a very pretty girl.

AETHELRED

My father says girls must be more than just pretty, as boys must be more than just strong.

AELCHFLAED

Your father is a wise man. Both must be prepared to bleed for their people.

A long silence stretches between them. Sunlight shines down onto the throne.

AELCHFLAED

You are not like your brother.

He shakes his head. She wraps her hand around his, her arm passing through the thin line of sunlight. Aethelred looks up at her.

AETHELRED

My father says I am kind-

er. I'm not sure whether  
he means that as a com-  
pliment.

(pause)

Is Osthryth like you?

AELCHFLAED

No... She's much better.  
Maybe one day you will  
meet and be able to judge  
for yourself.

INT. TAMWORTH BURH

655 A.D. Aelchflaed sits by the fire. The room is filled with spring flowers and painted eggs. Men and women are dancing to the sound of a lyre. Laughter fills the room.

Heavy doors open with a thud, and men dressed in chainmail enter. People cheer and run over to greet their loved ones.

Peada is dressed in unscuffed mail, with a thick fur cloak. He strides over to his wife, pulling her into his arms and kissing her.

PEADA

My love, I bring great  
news. My father is dead.  
Your father and husband  
are victorious.

She touches his hands, turning them over and finding them soft, clean and unscathed.

AELCHFLAED

At Winwaed?

PEADA

(nodding)

I saw it all with my own  
eyes. My father's head  
cleaved straight off his  
shoulders by your father.

Aelchflaed scans his face, the music dimming.

AELCHFLAED V.O.

Peada, who at Winwaed  
witnessed the famous  
Penda lose his head to the  
sword of Oswiu. Penda  
the last great pagan king.  
A head for a head. Blood  
for blood.

Aelchflaed's jaw clenches. Focus on her belt, her fingers feel for her father's dagger. Next to it, a garland of snowdrops.

She looks up at the carving of Eostre, now decorated with flowers. She takes the garland from her belt and places it on Peada's head.

He smiles, drops to the bench beside her and pulls her to his lap. Around them, his men cheer, drinking mead and laughing. The hall is filled with noise, which fades.

AELCHFLAED V.O.

And so came Eastertide,

which as every good  
Christian knows, is the  
season of feasting, and of  
betrayal.

Focus on Aelchflaed as she slowly begins to smile.

AELCHFLAED V.O.

Of death and rebirth.

Men at arms, their swords hanging loosely or discarded as they  
laugh, toast and feast. The women sitting on laps, serving mead,  
laughing.

AELCHFLAED V.O.

My father waited patient-  
ly, through long winters  
for his vengeance. Un-  
der-king to Penda, he  
waited. Hand-kisser to  
Penda, he waited. Father-  
in-law of Penda's daugh-  
ter, he waited. Father-in-  
law of Penda's son, the  
betrayed of kin, he waited.

Empty throne, decorated with wilting flowers.

AELCHFLAED V.O.

In my veins runs the  
blood of ancient kings.  
Of royal forefathers that  
put Pybba's offspring to  
shame. I am the daugh-  
ter of Oswiu, brother to  
Oswald, saintly king, son

of Aethelfrith of Bernicia  
and Acha of Deira. Killed  
by Penda and dismem-  
bered whilst in prayer.

Aelchflaed stands, taking her husband's hand. He stands with her. She leans up and kisses his cheek, looking up at him.

INT. BED CHAMBER

Aelchflaed pulls Peada into the bed chamber, closing the curtain behind them. The room is silent, only a few candles in the corner lighting the room.

AELCHFLAED

Let's take off your ar-  
mour, my love, and the  
stain of battle. Let's cele-  
brate this great victory.

Focus on the candles, shadows flickering over the wall. Wooden cross hangs straight behind the bed.

The mail drops to the floor with a thud. Distant music outside the hall.

Aelchflaed pulls Peada closer, touching his cheek.

PEADA

I have missed you too, my  
sweet wife. And now with  
Penda gone, we will build  
a new dynasty, you and I.

He leans in to kiss her, but she touches his lips and smiles.

AELCHFLAED V.O.

Peada's weakness was his  
own undoing. They may  
whisper and they may  
plot, but whose hand gave  
Oswald his satisfaction  
and long-awaited revenge?

Aelchflaed runs her hand down Peada's body. Kissing him, she feels for her belt and drives the knife into his belly. She stabs him under the left arm and watches as his eyes widen.

He splutters, bloody froth at his mouth and drops to his knees. Blood covers Peada's cheek.

He tries to speak, reaches out to his wife, then drops to the floor.

Aelchflaed takes Peada's fur cloak from the bed, wraps it around her shoulders, wipes the knife on the bedsheets. And looks down, unmoved, at her dead husband. Peada's blood pools around his body, soaking into the floorboards, the white snowdrop garland askance on his head.

Aelchflaed disappears down the corridor.

INT. HALL

Early morning. A thrall enters. He's a young man with plain grey clothing and scruffy blonde hair. He tidies the hall, clearing plates and cups, straightening the decorations, wiping spilled ale from the table. He sings Dinogad's Smock to himself as he cleans.

When he opens the shutters, morning sunlight penetrates the

hall, low groans from those sleeping nearby. With his broom, he reaches through the hole to jolt the eaves. Three crows fly out and into the morning sky.

The thrall places his broom against the wall and walks towards the curtains of Peada's chamber. His eyes widen as he spots a trail of blood.

The thrall opens the curtains carefully. He spots Peada lying face up in a pool of blood, his eyes still open.

The thrall stumbles back, shouting for help.

Focus on Peada's face as the sunlight shines in a line over him.

AELCHFLAED V.O.

But Penda had many  
sons, and one Aethelred  
married himself to my  
sister Osthryth.

INT. TAMWORTH BURH

697 A.D. Osthryth, a woman with greying gold hair stumbles to the floor in the great hall, clutching her throat. She wears a golden crown which falls off her head as she hits the floor. Her gaze fixes on the red curtains to the royal chambers, a dark stain still visible on the floor.

AELCHFLAED V.O.

And Osthryth was also  
forced to choose when  
her brother, Ecgfrith,  
King of Northumbria,  
was attacked by Wulfhere,

her husband's brother.  
The eternal choice of kith  
or kin.

Osthryth coughs up blood, the red stains splattering over her white dress and crown.

AELCHFLAED V.O.

When Wulfhere died  
from a mysterious ill-  
ness, my sister Osthryth  
came to be queen, with  
Aethelred by her side.

Osthryth takes a last breath, empty eyes staring at the spot where Peada had been murdered years earlier.

AELCHFLAED V.O.

But the Mercians were  
not content. So they took  
their vengeance on that  
good woman, here in the  
warmth of her own hall.

A Mercian banner is draped over Osthryth's body. Two large men lift her up and carry her outside.

AELCHFLAED V.O.

Honest, pious Aethelred,  
sickened by the killing,  
waited until his neph-  
ew Coenred was grown  
before he left the king-  
ship to him and became a  
monk at Bardney.



EXT. FLADBURY CONVENT

Aelchflaed stands by the river, wind in her hair. She reaches into her grey cloak, takes out the dagger given to her by her father.

AELCHFLAED

I am the last of them. All  
still bright as sunshine  
in my mind. I have not  
forgotten. But I will not  
play their games or be  
their pawn.

Brief images of her uncle, father-in-law, father, husband, sister. She tosses the knife into the water, watching the ripples as it sinks beneath the water.

The grey clouds shift, giving way to a bright afternoon. Aelchflaed leans back against an old fence.

AELCHFLAED V.O.

The deal I made with a  
long-dead father and a  
long-dead brother. The  
price of my freedom, my  
virginhood and the stain  
for which I must now  
spend the rest of my days  
praying for absolution.

Bells ring from the convent, followed by the chatter and gentle laughter of nuns. Aelchflaed looks over her shoulder to see her fellow nuns talking together as they walk inside the old building.

AELCHFLAED V.O.

Here I have found sistership, friendship and sanctuary from men's ambition. I would not trade a single moment of it.

She smiles, dusting off her skirt.

After a long pause, watching the last ripples of her disappearing knife, she walks back through the gate and towards the convent.

INT. FLADBURY CONVENT

705 A.D. Aelchflaed sits beside a priest in a quiet wooden room, a table between the two of them. It is dark with only the light of one candle between them and a bowl of figs.

AELCHFLAED

Bury me under the holly  
tree and divide my robes  
and good linen equally  
between my sisters.

The priest, a younger man, nods and writes down her last wishes, his face grave.

AELCHFLAED

Send my cross to my  
sister, kinswoman to that  
Hilda of Whitby.

PRIEST

(writing)

To Hilda of Whitby...

Aelchflaed smiles as she watches him, leaning back in her seat. She glances up at the cross on the wall.

AELCHFLAED

My little book I give  
to the good people of  
Eoforwic. The silver coin  
in my purse, which came  
to me upon my marriage,  
is to go to St Cuthbert's  
church at Buthceaster to  
build there a stone upon  
which is told all the deeds  
of those whose fame I  
have spoken.

The priest finishes writing, looking up at her.

PRIEST

And you, sister? A last  
confession perhaps?

AELCHFLAED

I have nothing to confess  
father. I've had years of  
praying to prepare my  
soul.

The priest looks at her skeptically but not unkindly. Aelchflaed coughs, smiles and looks up.

AELCHFLAED

History will remember  
Peada as a martyr. Not a  
betrayer of fathers and  
gods.

She pauses, chuckling bitterly. The priest watches her silently.

AELCHFLAED

History won't remember  
me at all.

She looks down into the flame of the candle.

AELCHFLAED

But I am Aelchflaed,

daughter of King Oswiu of Bernicia. Great, great granddaughter  
of the mighty Uryen.

Focus on her face as she looks up at the priest.

AELCHFLAED

Fame is for men after all,  
like honour and revenge. I  
am content to commit my  
body and soul to God's  
tender hands, which are  
more gentle than any  
man's.

FADE OUT.

THE END.

# The Parade

Harry Emmerson

Harry Emmerson is an English writer, born in Boston, Lincolnshire in 2003. He is currently in the final year of a Creative Writing degree at the University of Lincoln. When he's not writing, he is usually being punched in the face.

He sat compliant, lined up alongside his siblings. They listened to Father address the entire town, preparing them for the parade, a tradition started in honour of the first Mother. Father's speech was fuelled by his narcissism and got bleaker each year. Each year the parade got longer; the circle got bigger. Father liked all his children to watch, they would walk from school, two by two. Enel was far too young to remember his first parade, only the feeling of sickness that came with it. The children stood in silence, watching. Father's speech drew autonomously to a close. The first bell rang.

The whips began to crack, and the ornate door swung open in a wave of dust. Black steel rattled around the wrists and ankles of each painter. Their bare feet, pale and thin, dragged across an even paler floor. Each of them shuffled forward, their eyes glazed, lacking any emotion. Their brown robes barely clung to their limp shoulders.

'Such an illustrious shade of white and purple, don't you think, children?'

They nodded. They always nodded. Turning his attention back to the parade, Enel started to take a tally. Counting the feet, which he found much easier, had no risk of eye contact, or worse, a toothless plea for help.

There were ninety-four painters in Enel's eighth parade. The cold of The Grand Altar was starting to permeate through his brown hessian clothes; the structure didn't do much for heat. That was intentional. The Grand Altar was a 'D' shape, completely white marble. The inside ring was fitted as the Cavea and the flat side stood blank with one imposing door in the centre.

The ring of the second bell came as the doors were pulled

closed. The painters stood in a perfect circle, each facing the person in front. They reached out their bonded hands, dropping their filed teeth to the floor. The Pikemen cracked their whips and the painters each raised their right foot, stomping down and stepping forwards.

Not one painter made a sound as they bit into their own flesh, they each followed on. Step after step, the painting began to take shape, the red ring of trust a barrier surrounding the hungry guillotine. For the first time Enel didn't feel sick. He could simply watch and enjoy the parade.

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A little over four hours after the first bell, the heads of the painters rolled, and the children were all marching back. Father was at the front of the procession, with the other relatives, returning them to school.

Enel was paired with Michael for the walk. The boy was fair-haired and stout, and usually talkative, though the only noise was marching feet on cobble and the occasional whisper that caught the wind. The silhouette of the school fell from the ground and into the sky, piercing the rising sun. It clawed up in the centre of the town, surrounded by mountains that looked like goats' horns.

Further down the line two girls giggled together, a little too loud. Father dropped back and slapped them both. They hit the floor and he began to stomp on them. His face remained relaxed, even as he twisted his heel into the cheek of one of the girls. Father hauled them up by the scruffs of their necks to keep them going and the line moving. He marched back to the front of the line and out of earshot. Enel couldn't wait anymore.

‘I have an idea for tomorrow’s antics, a grand idea.’ He waited for Michael to question him; he offered no reaction. ‘Of course, it will have to be after hours, pulling off a big stunt like this.’

To his disappointment, Michael still didn’t seem interested. Not that it had ever stopped him before.

‘So what? You want to be like all our other siblings? Nod when Father says nod, eat when he says eat, shit when he says shit...’

Michael turned his head, his face curling as he slowly thought up a retort. ‘I’m not like our siblings... but maybe I should be. They say kids like us grow up to be talented painters.’

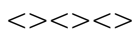
The line began passing through the steel gates, gathering into blocks in the mossy courtyard.

‘Says who exactly? This lot?’ Enel nodded to their siblings; all stood catatonic.

‘Father. Father said it in his speech. In part four... maybe five?’ Michael looked at Enel, as though asking a genuine question. Enel opened his mouth, but snapped it shut at the recognition of a metronomic clicking, metal on stone. They faced forward, eyes open, mouths closed, ready to obey. Auntie hobbled on closer, her peg leg forcing her to lean to one side.

‘Breakfast, children.’

They all stepped forward, marching in unison through the front door. As they got inside, the flat cobble was replaced with a dark wood, its ancient grooves worn down by generations of children.



The dining hall was a warm room, with food already laid out. The children were left to eat in peace, between five and six per table.



Michael sat opposite a girl named Helen, twelve years old like himself, and next to Enel. On the table next to theirs were two other boys, Aaron and Reece, who were both nine. The room filled with cautious chatter.

‘Tell me the one about the cloth man!’ Michael urged, picking bits of mould from his bread before he began eating.

‘Well, it happened after the parade, just like today, only Walter snuck away after he saw a man with bright purple robes, and golden fingers,’ Enel recounted. ‘This man had dark skin, like wood, and pointy ears like a devil!’

Michael hummed his appreciation for the tale. Helen had her eyes fixed on Enel, her blonde hair wrapped around the sides of her head like a scarf. Her expression soured as Enel continued the story.

‘He had a big wagon, pulled by a giant sheep, and from the wool he made all kinds of clothes. Walter said that even the thickest jumpers were as light as... the mould from your bread!’

Helen huffed through her nose, putting down her food.

‘I’ve told you not to encourage him, Michael, you’re a bad sibling.’

Michael’s bottom lip formed an upside-down horseshoe, but still he pushed back.

‘We’re just having fun; it’s not like we’re gonna go do it too.’

Enel scowled.

‘If it’s no big deal then why don’t you tell one of the stories to Uncle?’ Helen said. Her hand rose, stroking her hair over the side of her head. Aaron and Reece both giggled. The boys had round faces, and were both taller and plumper than Enel despite being a few months younger.

‘How can you even hear what they’re saying, aren’t you deaf?’

Reece spat as he spoke, and Aaron chortled. Helen teared up.

‘Keep on talking, Uncle will do the same thing to you if you keep losing teeth.’ Michael came to her defense. The two boys fell silent, eyes on their meals.

‘Thank you, Michael, but the same is true for you. What if Uncle knew you had a banned book?’

‘It can’t be banned if they don’t know it exists,’ Enel spoke.

‘Don’t be petty, are you really gonna be a freak over some silly stories?’ Helen countered.

‘They aren’t silly, they’re true and I’m gonna be just like Walter.’ Enel remained enthusiastic.

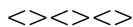
It was Michael’s turn to be silent.

‘If Walter really did escape, he’d be dead. There is nothing but death past the mountains. Don’t you listen to Father?’

‘That’s not true! When Walter met the cloth man, he said he had a map, he said that Black Valley is like a seed compared to the rest of the world and I’m gonna see it all!’

Helen opened her mouth to retort, then clamped it shut. The humming of chatter died at the crescendo of metal tapping.

‘I could hear you from halfway down the corridor. You’ll eat the rest of your breakfast in silence. Uncle will be just outside.’ Auntie pivoted on her steel tipped peg leg, wobbling back to whence she came.



Nineteen minutes passed. Enel and Michael stood shoulder to shoulder, elbow-deep in tepid water. The kitchen was cramped, fitted with a large oven for bread. Sacks of flour were stacked high in one corner and a single window lit the room. Dust filled the air. Most of the children were busy cleaning the halls and dining room,

with just Aaron also in the kitchen. The trio had a brief respite; the soap the boys used to wash the wooden plates was coarse and smelt of salt.

‘I know how much you like those stories, but Helen is probably right. Why should we believe one book you found hidden in the floor over our family?’ As Michael spoke Enel’s hands spun soap into the plates progressively faster.

‘And you think the family doesn’t lie? If we look, we can find proof. I’ll find proof,’ Enel pleaded.

Behind them Aaron was rifling through a cupboard. The wooden door was scratched around the lock. Michael flared his nostrils and sucked his teeth for a moment.

‘Enel... grown-ups have to lie sometimes, but that doesn’t mean they lie all the time. What if you got beyond West Peak and ended up swallowed by the black sand?’

‘I don’t care; I don’t want to live in a place where my teeth get pulled out ‘cause I won’t do what someone else wants me to. I want to be free.’

‘Free? You’d never even thought about that before you found that damn journal.’

‘I did too, all the time I did!’

As their voices escalated Aaron poked his head up from his brunch table and spoke through bread-puffed cheeks.

‘Would you two not be so loud, if an adult hears you arguing you’ll blow this job for all of us.’

Enel scowled and Michael sighed in response.

‘If you’re so scared, Aaron, why don’t you go watch the door. It’s not like you’re helping anyway.’

Following his older brother’s prompt, Aaron headed across the kitchen, prying the black door open. He poked his head out,

still chewing. Aaron looked left, then right, then squealed as Uncle's umbrella of a hand clamped over his scalp, rolling into a fist as the old man took hold of the boy's hair.

'You again? No, no, no, this time you're losing adult teeth.'

Aaron bawled as he was dragged away. Enel and Michael stayed silent, eyes on the sink, just washing dishes.

After chores came maths. Elaine was the teacher. She was tall and thin and had papery skin. Her eyes were large and brown and she would often smile around the children, showing a row of three missing teeth on the left side of the top row. The class was well under way, with the children each solving a unique equation, their workings being scratched onto a slate with chalk. Michael pottered through his work, his slate littered with crossed-out workings and incorrect answers. Enel on the other hand had finished; having done so he raised his hand and asked to be excused to the toilet. Elaine spoke softly.

'Of course, just hurry on back, we all know how Auntie can get about toilet breaks at lesson time.'

Enel rose and hurried between the rows of desks and out the door, flashing Elaine a toothy smile on his way out. The grin faded, his expression blank as he focused his hearing, listening for Auntie. He scuttled up along the empty corridor and up the stairs, safely to Auntie's office. Enel snuck in, closing the door behind him. The office was small and bookshelves lined each wall, apart from the back which held three windows side by side lighting the desk which faced the door. Enel's teeth came back on display, his heart pumping hard as his pupils dilated, too caught up to hear a steadily approaching tapping. Enel pried open the bottom drawer on the left side of the desk. It was locked, but Walter had learned the mechanism was faulty and could be bypassed. Enel lifted the

drawer above and pressed down on the bottom drawer from the back. The sound of metal on wood got louder until eventually piercing Enel's bubble of excitement. He grabbed the key from the bottom drawer and closed it, the one above too. Storing the key in his pocket, Enel readied himself to be caught by Auntie, playing with her stationery. He winced as the doorknob began to turn, Auntie's round body darkening the misted glass. She paused her entry, halted by a raspy voice. It was Uncle.

'I've put the teeth in the lock up, Wallace is going ahead with expanding the painting school. We're starting with Aaron and that boy, what's his name? The little guy that's always talking to that Michael.'

'We're sending off Enel? It's about time, he's been getting far too slick, Wallace should have sorted him months ago. The last thing we need is the other kids copying him.'

'Wallace always was too lenient for a Father.' Uncle's voice was bitter.

'Yes, well, that's why we have you.'

Enel swayed, his breath hitching as he spun around, searching for an escape.

He pursed his lips, breathing through his nose and down into his belly. The windows were the only other opening to the outside. Clambering over the desk, Enel quietly shimmied one up, sticking his head through, like the painters at the guillotine. He looked down at the two-storey drop. The ground was all flat cobble, save for a small ring of dirt that encompassed most of the school, a once lush hedge wilted on top of it. With his face scrunched tight he climbed out and gripped onto the ledge, hanging from his fingers.

A gust flew by as the office door swung open. Enel let go

of the chipped wood and plummeted, stifling a scream. The air gushed from his lungs, his vision was blurred and spinning. Wheezing, Enel clutched his chest, then rolled onto his belly. He pushed his head against the cobble to get his knees under him. He fell forwards, not quite in a straight line but managing to duck around the corner. He took a brief, triumphant moment to catch his breath, then hurried back to class.

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They were all sent inside to clean up before the evening meal. The washroom was adjacent to the bedroom, and had several wash-stations and a single toilet that was only used during the day. At night Uncle guarded the door. Enel scrubbed his hands and face of the day's dirt and took a moment to inspect himself in the carcass of a mirror above the sink. He was one big bruise. It stretched from his right hip all the way to his left shoulder, changing colour slightly along the way, like a decomposing rat. He cleaned the wash station for the next person, got dressed, and headed downstairs to wait in the dining hall.

After dinner, Enel returned to bed with the others, his eyelids drooping the second his head hit the pillow. Enel shook himself awake, waiting patiently, watching the moonlight creep in through the window and stretch itself across the aisle along the center of the room. Once it was a third of the way in Enel quietly shuffled out of bed and over to Michael, giving his cheek a poke.

'Still awake?' Enel whispered.

'Yup, you remember the deal?' Michael swung his legs off the bed as he sat up.

'We're going out the window again, and I'm gonna show you

some proof? Enel stuck his fingers under the window above his bed and slid it up. The two climbed out onto the tiled roof. On sure feet, they traversed the sloping roof, but a gap began to grow between them.

‘Enel, slow down. Enel!’ Michael lunged, twisting a grip into Enel’s shirt as his weight tipped over the edge. In his haste he had almost fallen twice the distance from Auntie’s office. ‘What’s with you? You know not to rush around out here,’ Michael scolded as he hauled Enel back onto the tile, where Enel dusted himself down.

‘I know a lot more than you do! You’ll see soon enough.’

‘If you’re gonna be like that, I’ll just go back to bed.’

Enel’s lip quivered. ‘You can’t! I can’t go without you!’

‘You’ve done it before, you’ll be fine, I’m getting too old for this stuff, it’s too dangerous.’

‘You don’t understand, you have to see this, we have to escape together.’

‘Enel, stop! I’m done, I’m not escaping and you’re not either. It’s a nice fantasy but it’s not real. We can work hard and live a good life in the town together, after we finish school.’

‘I can’t... it’s too late now.’ Droplets formed at the point of Enel’s chin and his shoulders shook.

‘Enel... what happened?’

‘I was preparing for tonight; I stole a key from Auntie’s office and Uncle...’ Michael stepped forward and embraced his younger brother.

‘He caught you?’

‘No. He was talking to Auntie. Father... Father is going to send me to be a painter.’ Michael stiffened, gripping his sibling tighter. ‘Okay.’

‘Huh?’ Enel looked up, cheeks red and wet.

‘Okay. Let’s escape.’

‘You mean it?’

‘Of course, I’ll always look after you, I always have done.’ The two fell silent as they embraced. The black jaws of the surrounding mountains were like a split eggshell, the open sky above an intricate tapestry of countless stars. They separated; Enel wiped his nose on his sleeve.

‘Then let’s go, we’re gonna bring along the best food you’ve ever tasted!’

‘We’re escaping tonight?’ Michael tilted his head.

‘Of course, I don’t know how much longer I’ve got. Besides, I’ve been planning this for months.’

Enel bounded along before stopping above a classroom window. The drainpipe was the only way down and in. Enel went first. Rung by rung he lowered himself. He opened the classroom window with his foot and dropped inside. Michael soon followed, only more hesitant to let go as he fell in.

‘Stay close to me, we can’t lose track of time.’

‘Lead the way, I’ll keep watch from behind.’ Michael followed. Enel moved out ahead, keeping to the walls as the two slunk around the school like alley cats. Moving left out of the classroom door, they were almost at the stairs which began by moving up around eight steps, it then squared off and turned ninety degrees. This happened around four times before they reached their apex, though the boys weren’t going up.

Enel ducked under the stairs and felt along the wooden floor in the dark, eventually coming across a metal ring.

‘This is it, hidden in plain sight, kinda,’ he announced to Michael, that triumphant smile returning.

‘A hatch? I’ve never seen it, and it leads to someplace cool?’



‘Oh, you could say that.’ Enel gave it a harsh tug and grunted as his shaky arms swung it open to a set of wooden stairs, scuffed and dusty. The two climbed down and their skin formed goose-bumps.

‘Why is it cold? It’s still the middle of summer,’ asked Michael

‘That’s what this room is for, it keeps things cold, they store the meat here.’

‘Let me guess, you read about it in Walter’s journal?’

‘Of course.’

‘This is pretty neat, but how does this help us escape?’ Michael said.

‘Cause that’s not all they keep down here.’ Enel rummaged around for a while. It took a minute, but he finally found it: a silver gridded block. He held it up to Michael who squinted to see.

‘A block of metal? What are we gonna do, sell it?’

‘It’s not metal. Walter said it’s called chocolate, we eat it.’

‘I’m not eating metal, Enel.’ Michael folded his arms.

Enel rolled his eyes and stood up. ‘I guess if I hadn’t read about it, I wouldn’t think to eat it either.’ Enel started scraping the outer layer of silver. It tore, and they were left with brown blocks.

‘Woah, so it was just paper disguised as metal?’ Michael leant in to get a closer look.

‘Basically, and now we can eat this part, this is the chocolate.’ Enel broke off two pieces. It was stiff and cold but came off easily enough. He handed one to Michael and they looked at each other, placing the chocolate in their mouths, hesitant at first. The two giggled as the cold blocks started to melt in their mouths.

Michael and Enel ate and ate, the corpse-like chill of the fridge long forgotten. The chocolate too seemed to just disappear. Michael rubbed his belly.

‘I hope you’re not done; we still haven’t tried this.’ Enel pulled a jar from the same box; it was filled with a red purple that was dotted with seeds.

‘Walter says it’s *jam*, apparently the adults put it on bread.’

‘This is so cool, and there’s more, right? Beyond The West Peaks?’

Enel winced slightly. Michael was far too loud.

An uneasy feeling in Enel’s stomach shifted, and not from the chocolate – something was off. Something was different, but he couldn’t tell what. It was still too dark to see, so Uncle should still be outside their room, and they would have heard Auntie’s metal foot.

Then Enel realized: it was only slight, but he could hear breathing. His own and Michael’s of course, but there was a third set of inhales and exhales. It took a second for him to catch on, but Michael heard it too. Enel’s eyes had adjusted enough so he could see the beads of sweat rolling off a pale forehead.

Enel leant over to his left, looking past Michael as tears began to well in his eyes.

A pale face blotched with sunspots was shrouded in blackness. Wiry hair bulged from atop a wrinkled forehead. The hollow face turned from a stagnant expression into a frown. Below a crooked, leaking nose Enel saw a partially toothless mouth. The thick, chapped, bleeding lips warped into a vicious snarl.

Uncle reached out his hands, long, bony and coarse. They latched onto Michael’s ears and he let out a cry as he was hoisted from the ground. Uncle began to curse as he shook him violently, spittle and blood flying from his gums. The skin connecting Michael’s ear with his head was tearing, and quickly. Blood poured down his face, seeping between Uncle’s fingers.

In a panic, Enel threw himself at Uncle, crashing into him with his left shoulder. It popped and Enel whimpered but still took Uncle off his feet. Michael slammed to the floor, clutching his head and wailing. At the same time Uncle collapsed onto the stairs behind him. Enel dropped to one knee and tried pulling Michael to his feet.

‘Quiet! Quiet! If we wake everyone else, we’ll never get away!’

Enel didn’t have the strength to bring him to his feet, but Michael had at least stopped screaming. Enel’s back and shoulder began to throb. Uncle groaned and pushed himself back onto his feet.

# A Collection of Poems

Lucy Howard

Lucy Howard is a poet, student, and collector of hobbies. She loves baking for her friends and learning about whatever new thing has caught her interest. She enjoys playing with language and letting weird and wonderful things loose on the page.

what if we woke up geometric? // one of my friends is a triangle  
now // big and sturdy // another a something-agon // with so  
many sides she looks circular // and now my dead friend  
actually takes a bite out of me // my scalene trapezium body  
// with a harsh // gap // in its area // and my width always  
reaching // for something impossible.

*These things happen*, my friend says. He's a little green man and knows a lot of words. Long ones, like *perspicacious*, which he says I am, and cool-sounding ones, like *conundrums*, which he says I cause. He smiles when he says it and, despite the third eye, he knows how to throw it back when we're in the club, his cheeks flushing blue. *Do you think he has a copper-based blood system?* my friend yells, mid-twerk, during 'Toxic' by Britney Spears. *What the fuck do you mean?* I yell, hands raised and voice hoarse. Brian the alien is doing the robot. He's concentrating hard. He's quite charming once you get him going. Or *winsome*, you may say, if you were smart like him. I'm not, which he says is *apocryphal*. I assume that means funny.

i keep telling strangers we're family // i want to unpeel  
that carrot // let me meet you better // take back  
your game nights // turn the expiration dates around  
// forget them // i'm arguing with your oven door  
again // i'm begging you // set an alarm this time.

*cooking appliances are the leading cause of house fires*  
each meal you make forces me to check the hob  
*domestic fire incidents peak in the winter months*  
i'm used to you staring at my burned hands more than my eyes  
*8% of house fires are started deliberately*  
but we already knew that



arguing over a group name at th pub quiz // hand sanitiser getting passed around // the music is from the 2000's // asking if you want water while i'm up // sharing chips across the table // pointing out the bathroom for strangers // we don't know shit about pink floyd // or the height of the cathedral // but losing never felt so triumphant as it did on that walk home // there's always next week // right?

# Happy Hour in Heavenhell

A. O. Kerrison

A. O. Kerrison is a Yorkshire-based writer, currently studying Creative Writing. Specialising in Science-Fiction and Fantasy, he loves making the nonsensical feel grounded, finding reality in the fantastical. When away from the keyboard, they enjoys escaping to his favourite fictional worlds, and he is upsettingly good at Mario Kart.

They haven't ordered a drink in an hour. I've had to break up three fights in the time they've been here, yet somehow they're causing the biggest scene of everyone. It's like they're invisible to all but me, fidgeting in their grey hoodie.

A cracked glass rolls into my elbow, leaving a trail of booze behind it. A thirsty patron begins tapping the bar as if I don't know he's there. I pour him another pint, tossing his empty glass over my shoulder and through the stockroom window. The usual sound of crunching follows, and I've finally managed to stop wincing at it. As he walks away with his new drink, I see the usual sight: a mess of flailing limbs, splashing drinks, and enough sin to break a thousand commandments.

As the bar begins to clear out, Grey Hoodie still hasn't moved. They sip their drink like it's sweet poison and they're craving a slow death. I move towards them, rapping my fingers as I go. They react to the sound, jolting on their barstool. I stand over them, knocking on the bar like a door. They raise their head.

'You know, this is the least I've seen someone drink during Happy Hour.' I lean forward, and they lower their head to obscure themselves.

'I didn't know it was Happy Hour.' Their voice is light and scratchy, like a bubble blower with a smoking problem.

'Well, now you do! You want another?'

 They shake their head, then lift their drink.

'I'm happy with this one.'

I sigh. 'Okay. Hood down or I'm asking you to leave.'

There's a chuckle from under the hood. 'My hood is down.'

'No, it's not.'

They cock their head to the side. ‘My hood is facing down, is it not?’

I groan like I’m disgruntled, but I’m holding back a laugh. ‘I guess. Hood off then.’

‘Well, I’d need scissors.’

‘Why the fuck would you need scissors?’

A snort from beneath the hood. ‘So I can cut my hood off.’

I cross my arms. ‘Okay smartass. Get out my bar.’

They go silent, slumping in their seat like their body had been tensed the entire time. Their hands rise, fingers shaking, as they pull their hood down. They have skin like a wet beach under moonlight, decorated with abandoned brown seashells, chestnuts dashed with gold sprinkles for eyes, and scruffy hair like vanilla ice cream mixed with streaks of raspberry bubble-gum. They look like no-one I’ve seen before.

‘When did you die?’

They turn red. ‘I’m sorry?’

‘You’re new around here, aren’t you?’

‘In a sense.’”

I raise an eyebrow. ‘Alright, dickhead. *In a sense*. What the fuck does that mean? Tell me how long you’ve been dead.’

Their mouth hangs open, like the answer has run off before their tongue is able to utter it. I widen my eyes at them, getting close to their face. A bead of sweat runs down their cheek, and then I get a brief glimpse down the back of their hoodie. The sight shoves me against the spirit bottles behind me.

I say after a long breath, ‘You’re—’

‘Don’t.’

‘How did you...’

‘Doesn’t matter. Damn it, I knew this would happen at some

point, but still.’ They rise from their seat and turn. I step forward, lunging my tail over the bar and hooking it under their hoodie, halting them.

‘One more step and the whole bar finds out.’ I feel their shivers running down my tail as they reach up and put their hood back on. ‘Sit down.’ They perch on the barstool, their back to me. My tail unhooks itself.

‘Please.’

‘Answer my questions, and we’re chill. Name?’

They stare at the ground. ‘Ralice.’

‘A pleasure, Ralice. My name’s Nosk.’

‘A pleasure.’ Their silence could’ve shifted a continent. My tail wraps around the seat of the barstool, swivelling them around to face me. I lean my elbows on the bar, tilting towards them.

‘How did you get here? You’re supposed to be tucked up in bed.’

The corner of Ralice’s mouth twitches. ‘I can’t say.’

‘You can. What gives you the right to more starlight time?’ I lean closer, but whatever key locked their mouth shut was destroyed a long time ago. I shrug, standing up. I take their glass and toss it over my shoulder into the stockroom. They still refuse to face me. ‘You stand out like a sore thumb.’

‘Yet you still took over an hour to speak to me.’

I can’t suppress the smirk that slides across my face. ‘I was hard at work, as you can see.’

‘I didn’t think Devils had to work?’

‘Well, it’s either this or risking the streets,’ I say. Ralice hisses through their teeth. ‘And I’m not down for *double death* just yet.’

‘So, there’s only laws protecting Devils that work?’

‘Well, no, but you don’t drink if you kill the bartender.’ I force a smirk as Ralice stares at me with a look of unnerved concern.

‘That’s awful.’

‘That’s death, sweetie.’

I wish the bar was busier, because I feel like every Devil is eavesdropping on our conversation. Huffing, I see Ralice retreat back into their hoodie.

‘You know what? Show me.’

‘Show you?’

‘Show me how you got here.’

Their eyes widen. ‘I-I really shouldn’t—’

‘If you don’t show me, I’ll rip that hoodie off and let everyone see what you are...’ I glare at them, ‘Angel.’

Ralice freezes.

‘I-I...’ They start sweating. ‘I shouldn’t... I-I was p-planning...’

‘You’ve got to go back at some point, haven’t you? Show me.’

Ralice looks around the room, and I watch them realise that I am their best bet. As much as it pains me to threaten them, my curiosity needs quenching, and there is no way an Angel would take a Devil’s honesty in good faith.

‘There’s a building three streets over. Tallest in Hell.’

I raise an eyebrow. ‘Hellscrapers?’

Ralice nods. ‘Meet me on its roof in one hour. Don’t worry, it’s unguarded. See you there.’

They dart out of the bar before I have the chance to stop them. As I consider the implications they’ve presented to me, the fact that they *know* the roof is unguarded, I look down at the stool they had been sat in. Couldn’t they have waited the hour?

The rest of my shift ticks by, my eyes transfixed on the clock the entire time. I leave fifteen minutes earlier than I’m meant to and begin the walk over. Keeping to the main streets, I extend the

journey but avoid the alleyways. I look upon Hellscraper, the place where the dead wake up and realise they're not hurtling down a motorway anymore, or realise they did in fact lose that 'unlosable' shoot-out. I've only been in it once, never returning after I left it and began my death. Hellscraper is located below the red star, the burning body above which casts a scarlet hue upon the city. Stepping into the crimson-coated lobby, I dodge past bustling Devils at work. Those Hellish enough that they were condemned to not only spend the rest of their deaths supervising the dead, but also to never leave the building. As strange as it was to revisit the Hellscraper, that wasn't the strangest thing about my journey here.

After a tedious elevator ride, I step out onto the roof and see Ralice standing opposite a rickety shed. It looks like it was built by the idea of a carpenter.

'I don't understand why you had to leave an hour early.' I stand beside them, seeing they have a new confidence on their face.

'I was starting to feel unsafe in there. You were drawing attention to me.'

I'm tempted to apologise, but they keep talking.

'You wouldn't get your answers if I was beaten to death, but I can't imagine you'd consider that.'

'I was doing you a favour. You looked weird, not talking to anyone.' They groan, their eyes never leaving the shed.

'So, first guess. That shed is a portal.'

'Not even close.' They sigh. 'Do you know how the Mirror Line works?'

'Vaguely. They barely explained it when I arrived here. I know it's elite Angel magic.'

'It's the reason your bedroom doesn't flip every Mirroring. It doesn't just swap the Angel Side and the Devil Side; it reflects

them on themselves as they pass by each other. Gravity plays a big part too. So, Hell is covered by a Mirroring Ward. It sinks into the ground and enters the Mirror Line where the entire city is flipped upside down, allowing it to exit out the other side, Heaven taking its place on the side it just left. And, thanks to gravity, you'd never know that was happening if you lacked the knowledge.' I nod to demonstrate at least a crumb of comprehension. 'Heavenhell is a two-sided ethereal body, created by the Gods for fallen souls, but light only shines on the top side. Therefore, Angels invented a way for Sinners and Samaritans to share the light.'

'I think I understand.' I do not understand.

'Well, I found a way to bypass the system.'

I point with my thumb. 'The shed?'

'The ward of the Line only extends so far.' They tap the roof with their foot. 'This far. The highest point of Hell. Meaning, while our two cities enter the Mirror Line, anything above the boundary won't be dragged through.'

I glance over at the shed. It looks like a yawn would make it splinter. 'So, the city sinks, but since we'd be above the ward, we wouldn't sink with it. And when Heaven rose, we'd be taken up with it? But surely that wouldn't work unless—'

'Unless the Gods got lazy and made Heaven and Hell structurally identical. Architecturally and atmospherically, they couldn't be more different. But the tallest building in Heaven is in the same spot as the tallest building in Hell.'

Somehow, *somehow*, this makes sense. My curiosity is confirmed when I see a purple shimmer appear on the horizon, as the streets begin to quiet below. Everyone is heading home, as I should too. I sigh and laugh.

'Let's get going then.'



‘You want to come to Heaven?’ Ralice’s mouth forgets how to close.

‘No way I’m just taking your word for it.’

‘You realise that if you come through, you’ll be stuck in Heaven for... until the Mirroring happens?’

I shrug. ‘Fuck it. I can wait eight hours.’

‘You’re a fool.’

‘Probably. Or I’m just bored.’ Ralice looks at me like I’m mad, and maybe I am. ‘There’s only so much time I can spend looking at red and brown before I want a change of scenery.’

Ralice releases a breath so deep it taps the bottom floor. Then they look at me and fling their arms up in the air.

‘Sure. Only the worst could happen.’ The shimmering purple advances closer, and they open the door for me. We enter, then they close it like they’re performing a surgery.

I watch the roof become coated in a jelly-like substance that shines purple. The entire cityscape has vanished under this amethyst blanket and I don’t even notice we’re sinking for a moment. It feels like dreaming. The shed comes to a halt. I peer through a crack in the woodwork and see a sprawling, empty wasteland. I move, but Ralice holds me in place. We start moving again, rising this time, as the City of the Angels, Heaven, rises from the Mirror Line. Looking upon the purple cityscape, the layout is a perfect mirroring of Hell, but the architecture is grander and the colour palette is much healthier on the eye. Even the star above us has begun emitting a yellow light, casting a golden haze upon the City. It looks like the second attempt at constructing paradise, and my home was the failure that came first.

Ralice opens the door and leads me out. ‘Welcome to Heaven.’

The city is white with quartz and as quiet as a blessing. Angels

appear in the streets, their hushed voices creating a low hum that cascades along the white pillars that corner every building. The roof that I'm standing on is lined with gold, and the marble is smooth on my feet. My city looks like a cesspit. Their city looks like a *city*. It looks safe.

We exit the shed. There's a chance it's a placebo effect, but the air is nicer to breathe. Looking over the side of the building, I see an alleyway that looks kinder than a main street in Hell. Ralice takes off their hoodie and hands it to me. Two feathery wings appear either side of them, stretching to a wingspan similar to their height.

'How'd you hide them, then?'

'They can contract. Can you not...?' They tap their head, and I groan.

'No, I can't contract my horns, dick.'

Their mouth opens.

'Or my tail!'

Their mouth snaps shut. I put the hoodie on, trying to hide my horns the best I can. My tail tucks into my trousers. I look like an Angel in disguise now, which, in all honesty, looks no different to a Devil in disguise.

An Angel flies past us, waving. They shout something to Ralice, and Ralice calls back, but I'm too busy wondering how we're going to get down to listen. Then, as more Angels begin to fly around us, Ralice lifts my arms, hooks theirs around them, and begins flapping their wings. We rise for a moment, hovering over the edge, until they lower us into the alleyway below and I have to hold myself against the wall to keep the contents of my stomach in.

'Sorry. Should've warned you. But we had to get a move on

before it got busier. Let's call that payback for threatening me.' They smirk, and I offer a mockery of a smirk back.

'Won't it look suspicious if I have a hoodie on? Everyone else has their wings out.'

Ralice shakes their head. They point to the end of the alley, which leads to a main street. I see Angels walking about wearing coats, jumpers, even hoodies like mine.

'They're appendages. They get tired like arms or legs do.' They begin to walk towards the street. 'Plus, some Angels have wingspan anxiety.' I can't help but chuckle at that idea, and I'm glad to hear a light giggle escape Ralice's mouth too. They look back as I take my first proper step, and they gasp. 'Shoes. Off.'

'What?' I look down and see a footprint of ash and cinder. I huff, then pull both of my shoes off, tossing them into a dumpster beside us that has far too much of a holy glow for a dumpster. 'Ready now?'

'Indeed. Follow me, stick close, and all will be fine.'

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Walking through Heaven had been the safest I'd ever felt. Despite my demeanour, everyone was friendly, greeting us and smiling as we passed them. Ralice even stopped to engage in small talk with a couple, but there was something strange about the way they conversed. Ralice spoke to them in a way that was different to how they'd spoken to me.

We arrive at Ralice's home. They unlock the door, and we enter, my feet tickled by the doormat that reads 'Ps5:7.' I squint at it, like I'm missing something.

‘It’s a psalm.’ They clear their throat. *‘But I, by your great love, can come into your house in reverence; I bow down toward your holy temple. A little on the nose.’*

‘Definitely chose that one because it’s got the word ‘house’ in it.’

Ralice shrugs, but I catch their smirk. Their interior looks like it hasn’t been lived in. Too clean, too spotless, with no sign of a person decorating its walls. The white glares, and the gold trimmings lining everything had lost its charm once I’d walked past the seventeenth identical building. Ralice leads me to the lounge, where a grey sofa sits before a grey rug, opposite a grey table with a grey-rimmed TV on top. The bookshelf on the wall catches my eye, but after running my knuckles along the spines, I find all the books are fake. Par the bible in the centre.

‘Are you not allowed to decorate?’

‘Decorate it with what?’ Their giggle is wrapped in chains.

As they lead me through to their kitchen, I question the need for a sink to be golden. Now I’ve seen this, I can already estimate what the rest of the house looks like. I glance back into the lounge through the open doors, and I catch a clock on the wall that I hadn’t seen before. It’s been about an hour, so fifteen to go. Ralice stands in the kitchen, embarrassed of their paradise. I step towards them, a question brewing—

Fifteen. I look back at the clock. There’s sixteen hours on the clock. Not eight. Sixteen. I turn back to Ralice, a hot puff of air escaping my nostrils. Ralice looks through to the living room, and colour drains from their face.

‘Sixteen?’ I’m seething.

‘Yes.’

‘Ever since I died, I was told we got eight each. Have Angels

had double the amount of time in the light this whole time?' As I get in Ralice's face, they keep their composure, making me realise that while my war is real, I'm firing on the wrong front.

'Yes. And we knew the Devils only had eight.'

'But why?'

'Sinners and Samaritans, Nosk. They think we earned the light.' The ground feels softer than the air in a blink. Ralice brings me a glass of water. I sit down on a stool by the counter, Ralice standing across from me.

'I want to be surprised, so I can be angry. But I'm neither.' I look around. The interior looks like dead wealth. 'What do you even do for fun here? I know it's not great in Hell, but at least I can get shitfaced and forget about how bad it is.'

'Nothing that interests me.' They're back to not looking at me.

'Surely you could find something fun to do?'

Ralice smiles at me after a moment. 'What do you think I've been doing?'

It hits me like a flying Angel. I don't know why it'd taken me so long to realise it. It was never about seeing Hell, it was about seeing anywhere but Heaven.

'And?'

'And until right now, nothing interesting.'

'Well, I'm honoured.' I raise my glass of water like it's beer. They laugh.

'You're not like any other Devil I've met.'

I force a smile. 'I'm sure there's reasons for that.'

'If it helps, I don't feel like I belong here.' I lean forward. They're a master at capturing my intrigue. 'Angels aren't *good*. They're just *not evil*. I led an unremarkable life. I was a loner. I never knew who I was. When I made to Heaven, I realised I could

truly embrace who I was and change the things about myself that I hated. I had eternity to do it. I had eternity to change my mind. But that was the extent of my paradise. I had no one I wanted to share my comfort and happiness with. I never feel like I belong here because right now, I'm not the same person that died and got sent here.'

'If it's any consolation,' I say, 'if I had made it here, I could see myself wanting to help you make paradise feel like a paradise.' I offer them a smile.

'You seem more Angel than Devil. Why aren't you?'

My head drops. The room's gold dims, the white stops shining. I can feel my tongue in my mouth, and it doesn't want to be there anymore. My fingers tighten around the glass.

'You don't have to tell me.'

I raise my head. 'I killed my sister's abuser. The man had a history of abusing his partners, and my sister was his last. I killed him and dedicated the rest of my life to helping people stuck in abusive relationships. When I died, I awoke in Hell. They told me that the Angels sent their appraisals for the good I did, but that I'd guaranteed my place in Hell the moment I ended his life.'

Ralice stands there, not saying a word, but I can see a shimmer forming in their eyes. I lean back on the stool, stretching my back and my arms, forcing the tension out of my body.

'They told me that I had basically wasted my time.'

'That's bullshit.' They have fury on their face.

'I'm trying to convince myself it was worth it. But now, I'm spending every day alone, scared, and in constant danger. But it had to have been worth it.'

'You dedicated your life to helping people, Nosk. Of course it was worth it.'

‘Easy for the one who made it to Heaven to say.’

Ralice bows their head. ‘Sorry.’

I sigh. ‘No, I’m sorry. That wasn’t fair of me. I just...’ I look to Ralice. ‘I haven’t spoken about it since I got here. And it’s been years. I think. I don’t exactly count the days.’

The silence sits on the counter for a minute as I compose myself. Ralice looks around like they’ve never seen the room before, inspecting everything. It makes me chuckle.

‘Is it selfish for me to say I wish you’d been sent to Hell?’

‘Is it ungrateful for me say I wish I had too?’

‘Even if we aren’t friends yet, you’re at least enriching conversation.’

‘Funny how we can be on different ends of the afterlife yet have the same problem.’

‘Very funny.’ We look at each other for a moment, then burst out of laugh. ‘Fuck it, let’s stop moping and find something fun to do.’

Ralice looks hesitant as I stand and nod towards the door. They look at me like they see wings on my back, not horns on my head.

‘Fuck it, indeed. I’ll lead the way.’

I refrain from saying ‘*Obviously,*’ as they lead me back out of the house. I can tell the world looks a little different to them now. They look at me with a brain full of potential.

‘When was the last time you did karaoke?’

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Sixteen hours pass like one. Soon, we are standing on that roof again, my back to the shed. Their wings look so majestic in the dimming light of the golden star.

‘Will I see you again?’

They nod. ‘I know where to find you. And you know where to find me.’

‘I’m sure one day I’ll be brave enough to do this venture on my own. Right now, I’m still terrified of that idea.’

They giggle, and then I notice the horizon turn purple. ‘How do you think I felt the first time I tried this? At least you’d have a destination.’

‘I know, I know. Like I said, the day will come.’

I step into the shed, closing it with the same gentleness they had before. The purple ward hits their feet, turning their entire body purple, while my feet are missed. The city begins to sink as I call out:

‘Thank you for calling me an Angel!’

They laugh and call back, ‘Thank you for wanting me to go to Hell!’

We’re both laughing as Ralice sinks into the Mirror Line, while I remain alone in the wasteland. Hell rises from beneath me as I watch the golden star turn scarlet. The purple fades as the reflection finishes, and I step out of the shed.

I descend the Hellscraper. On the ground, I push through the bustle of the lobby, and stepping into Hell, an impossible feeling washes over me. I feel as though I’ve died again.



# Paws and Claws

T. B. Connell

T.B. Connell is a writer/actor/musician, from the flooded streets of Suffolk. They aim to create an enjoyable time for all with political messages veiled behind the Werewolf Drag Queens and Fish in Robot suits. Tee wishes to continue working in as many creative areas as their multi-disciplinary abilities will allow them.

There was a man, and his name was Chad. Chad Roberts. A young buck who exemplified *Apple Pie*. He was a football star fresh out of The United States, Florida. Florida, of course, was then (and still is) the breeding ground for all of God's mistakes and misdemeanours. A holy place for all things unholy.

America in the 50s – the era wherein the Earth was blessed by Chad's adolescence – was a time of revelry! There were streamers, ticker tape, and a raucous 'up yours!' to Satan and his gang of Alt-Right thugs, that hailed from the far-off land of Europe. The people of the good ole U-S-of-A cheered knowing they would never be subjected to a future under tyranny, and they would continue to cheer until their lungs collapsed into the soles of their feet.

The boy, that being Chad Roberts (in case you had forgotten), had a bright future ahead of him. While he had middling grades, and a frankly middling morality, he was a damn fine football player. When it came to holding balls, there was simply no one better. Yes, young Chad positively oozed all things American. He was the son of the Mayor (al candidate), with hair you could lose the sun in. While his father ran for office, Chad ran for pride. He ran for Uncle Sam. He ran for his college football team, with the ball tucked firmly under one arm.

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His feet tore through the Earth like he was trying to show hell to the face of God. His breathing was ragged, each inhale barely having enough time to bless his lungs before it was pushed out of his nostrils. He was a one-man militia in an athletic cup. He

had the football; he had a clear run of the end-zone. He had the stench of victory in his mouth, and it tasted like testosterone. The crowd was beating him over the head with their chants; he imagined that this was how Jesus felt carrying the crucifix. The ball was his mission, it might as well have been his beating heart.

He knew all manner of friends, family, and strangers (that would have wanted to be either of the above) glinted in the stands. Despite all of the action, his hair was as perfect as ever. He allowed himself a quick glance at the sidelines to see his mother, her face red from cheering. His mother stood alone, one hand waving the flag of her son's team, The Florida Seahorses, and the other clutching a 'Vote Roberts for Mayor: 1954' placard. What should've upset Chad was the fact that his father, The *Robert Roberts* often seen across the state, was not in attendance for the game. No, what actually upset the boy was the fact his mother's placard-waving arm seemed to be faltering lower and lower. Oh well, Chad had more important things on his mind than his mother's frail arms. Chad's mind was only focused on wanting to be fined by the college for tearing up the grass. He wanted to hardly be able to stop before crashing into the stadium wall. He wanted—

*He was there.*

He was in the endzone. The ball in his hand was across the line and thus, the game was won! The airhorns decreed it like cherubs announcing God was stepping down from Heaven. He had won the game. Friends and family alike stormed the field. Their congratulations rested on his shoulders and back, it felt uncannily like being slapped repeatedly.

'Chad!' one of his teammates said, resting their helmets together in a completely heterosexual manner. "We won! You won!"

'I...I did, didn't I?' Chad said, his mouth agape. 'Thanks to

my immense strength.'

'All thanks to your immense strength!' his mother muffled under the coach's chest after she pulled him in for a hug.

'Three cheers for Chad's big muscles!' a stranger said from somewhere too close for comfort.

In an almost fluid movement, he was swept off of his feet onto the shoulders of some of the more muscular of his teammates, all of them praising God for Chad's touchdown winning muscles. And in that moment, Chad had never felt more like the God they were praying to.

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It were as though the memories of the crowd served as miniature versions of themselves. Shrunken down, but still alive, still cheering inside his ears. He envisioned them clinging to his ear hairs while shouting their compliments directly to his brain. But alas, he stood alone outside the stadium with no little people to speak of.

He would've gotten a lift back with his mother but, for some reason, she left while he was changing. Not that this bothered Chad. No, he hardly even noticed. He didn't care much about waiting in the cold and the miserable outdoors for a cab, it was like a prelude to the shower he would be rewarding his game winning muscles with.

People back in The Fifties would stand with a thumb out to call a ride, a process that involved a likelihood of being murdered in the process. Even the lucky few who survived cab rides back in those days were returned home about as dinged up as the sheep's clothes that the wolf wore. Not that Chad was worried. He stood there, in his short shorts, feeling as though he were atop the sun.

His practically glowing thumb assail, waiting for his golden chariot to take him home.

The football star didn't blink, he didn't move so much as a fluttering eyelash. And yet, the taxi still managed to sneak up on him. The car had obviously been through a lot, shabby and scraped, so much so that it almost referenced a Picasso painting. The exhaust fumes rose through the air, dancing like lost souls the car had picked up while driving atop of a fire-soaked, brimstone path. And yet, there was this sweet smell that cut underneath the hellish vision, like the car was made of marshmallow. After all, the hotter the fires of hell, the sweeter the s'mores would be.

A yellow door flung open, unpropelled by a human hand leading to the interior of the car, which seemed to be a driving juxtaposition. The seats were burnt but plush and pink. A disco ball hung from the rear-view mirror, but half the reflective panels were missing. The neon lights were almost a Flash Gordon-esc laser, yet the entire driver's half was still cast in shadow.

'Where to, honey?' The driver spoke in a sickly sort of voice, the kind that would give a beaver toothache. It was gruff yet soft at the same time, like the sort of classy that came from long cigarettes and throwing your head back laughing.

'Home,' Chad said while strapping himself in, the leather seatbelts shockingly soft against his fingers. He didn't say *home* to be obtuse, he was simply that pig-headed that he assumed that almost everyone in Florida had either been to his place for a party or had chauffeured someone. Nonetheless, they pulled away from the stadium with the car spluttering like a laughing mannequin as they left.

'I caught your game,' the driver spoke after quite a period of silence. Chad found the quiet nice, but he was also upset the first

sentence wasn't an appraisal of him. 'Congratulations.' The driver followed, and Chad's ego was satiated. The indicators jumped to life, ticking like an applause.

'Thank you, it's been a good season.'

The cabbie just let out a mellow laugh, like being smacked across the face with a pillow. Chad paused for only a second. *What had he said to prompt a laugh like that?*

'I used to play back in the day,' the driver spoke with the fondness of having tea with a long-lost friend. 'I was good too, still doubt I could've beat you though. You're...something special,' said the driver. There was something lingering in that pause, like something from a nature documentary. This lingering ebb of danger was enough to stir even the most stubborn ears.

'Uh...I know?' Chad muttered absent-mindedly. As he pondered how to best stoke his flaming ego, a hand crept from the darkness onto the gear stick, a red nail peaked guided by the glare of a streetlight, glinting a warning to the boy. It was clearly painted by an adept hand, but still looked altogether out of place atop the steering wheel. 'Thanks, I think?' he said, suddenly aware of the space he was taking up in the car.

The driver said nothing else.

The journey after that carried on mostly silently, spare from the odd cough or movement of rear against the pink fluffy car seat. Before too long had passed, altogether too shortly, the cab had pulled into the plastic neighborhood that Chad called home. His house lay nestled in a perfect suburban utopia with each house made of the finest cheap concrete money could buy. Each lawn was trimmed to a millimetre of acceptable, decorated with ornate gnomes and flamingos that were forced to stand on one leg forever, almost a homage to Tantalus.

Another similarity between houses (not homes) was the fact that each and every building was adorned with a 'Vote Roberts' sign, as if they were individually running for Miss America pageants. Some were bigger than others, some were displayed prouder than others, but all represented the Roberts family. It made Chad proud. Being able to see your family name on so many homes felt like he had left an impact in the world, or whatever. Acutely, he was aware he couldn't be a sophomore football star all of his life, but those were thoughts pushed deep inside himself. They weren't allowed to surface for another four years. Finish college first, then address life. *The American way.*

The cab pulled outside the house with the largest 'Vote Roberts' banner brazenly draped across the front, blocking Chad's bedroom window in the process. Their house was the only one still adorned with last year's Christmas lights. The blinking bright red and green was now the apparent symbol of the Roberts mayoral campaign.

The engine of the car shut off and the purple neon interior followed. The driver was still a sitting mystery to Chad, still wearing a coat of the night. It wasn't that Chad felt unsafe in any capacity, he wasn't sure he was capable of it, but he still felt ill at ease. There was something about that hand, a flash he couldn't get out of his mind. It was like a talon, smeared with blood from a latest kill. Or just an awful shade of red, but he was far too macho to admit that. He went to unbuckle the seatbelt, but for some reason felt the latch was holding him in place.

'Nice house,' the driver said, their sickly-sweet voice trickling into all the crevices in his brain where they weren't wanted. 'I used to live around here,' the voice with no mouth muttered.

'Yeah, nice, isn't it?' Chad said, now using both hands in an attempt to undo the belt.

‘I thought so, it wasn’t so nice without a house though,’ spoke the other side of the cab. Chad couldn’t see their face, but he could feel the deep sigh from their lips as if it were against his bare neck. ‘You see, my Dad wasn’t so fond of some... lifestyle changes, so to speak.’ The voice paused for a moment, the pondering palpable in the air. It was almost like the thoughts alone had turned the Christmas lights on the sign from red to green. ‘Aw shoot, I’ve forgot what I was sayin.’

They let out a laugh, a hyena cackle through the Sahara moonlight. It almost felt like you could drown in it, like being on your knees in a wave pool.

‘My point was, keep your wits about you. You’ve got a future ahead of you.’

Chad just nodded his head a few times, hoping that was enough to satisfy the voice that was keeping him hostage. Not that he was hostage at all, but his conscious would never let him imagine he was still here willingly with someone whose fingernails looked like that. The tugging at the seatbelt was more and more violent with every second he remained in that car.

‘Need a hand, sweetie?’ the driver said, a creeping earnest in their voice. The figure jostled slightly. The car shuffled slightly. The driver lent over very, very slightly. But alas, enough. The Christmas lights that displayed his family name shifted to red and bathed the interior of the car in a deep blood hue. The seats, red. The steering wheel, red. The mysterious figure, now painted red.

It was implausible to call this person a man, and impossible to call them a woman. The red light seemed to creep over their face, illuminating more and more of the body that sat before Chad. Their nailed hands, now matching the light they danced in, waved up to reveal a bearded face, highly glammed.

The person in the driver’s seat had a deep brown beard to



rival the most furious of motorcyclists. But underneath, like Gaia's beating heart, sat a pair of ruby lips. Their eyes were positively alight with a life that Chad was sure should not have belonged to them, they were painted blue and glittery. The finest ye olde fabric makers would have had a struggle replicating the colour. Their hair was a brilliant plume of blonde lava, stacked high in a beehive that scraped the top of the vehicle. And all of this debauchery was without even mentioning the clothes. They sat in a dress, brilliant blue to match the colour they draped their eyes in. The dress was pulled over two incredibly plastic-looking breasts, either side of a tuft of chest hair that looked strong enough to wipe the scum off of a frying pan or separate salt from the ocean. But none of this distracted from the fact that the dress was...perfect. It was dotted with sequins, and should you have shone a torch on the cabbie, you would have seen a glittering diamond rather than whatever terrified Chad so much.

The stranger reached a hand over with a smile still beaming from their face. With hardly a look at the button holding Chad, the latch was released and the boy tumbled from the car. He felt the pavement beneath his back and breathed in as far as his battered lungs would allow. Before he had a moment to clear his eyes, the car had driven away with the engine spluttering in the plume of a wheezing laugh. It sounded like it was coming from every direction at once, yet it sounded loudest from the house behind him. His home.

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Nothing felt real after that moment. Chad knew he was home but didn't know how or when he had arrived. He had no clue how long he was fighting his brain and most of his nervous system for

the control of his body. He didn't know whether or not he had a meal with his family that night. All he knew was he was in bed, lying awake imagining bearded women and a speaking diamond. He was stuck. He was sure he had heard his mother knocking on his door to ask if he was okay, and he was sure he had said something smart to get her to leave him alone. In truth, the smart phrase was actually just 'leave me alone', but he felt himself to be justified, as young men often do. He felt the memory raking over his brain, like the sound of a hoe on a farm miles away. Who was the driver? Why were they like that? Consciousness was a plague to dear Chad Roberts, and the only safe space seemed to be locked away by his own polluted consciousness.

And so, he laid there in his bed. He tried to envision sheep, but they just all ended up sprouting beards and copious fake breasts. All he could do was lay there and wait for the Sandman. Perhaps this was all already some horrible dream, and he just needed to wake up.

At some point, after deciding to stay up all night, he finally felt sleep pull him into a drowse. This was no normal lack of consciousness. If falling to sleep is putting your head upon a feathered pillow, this was putting your head down, falling through the bed and emerging on the other side as a chicken.

As soon as the boy's eyes had fluttered shut, his spirit had left him. And his face started to creak. It started off sounding as though bones were rupturing, a groaning, aching crunch of skull. He was sprouting new parts and losing old ones in a manner that his body paid no mind to. His cheekbones protruded through his skin, tearing through his face only to be covered by a film of replacement skin moments later, splotchy and red like it was freshly flayed off some poor soul's back. This replacement bubbled and

corrupted as though it were threatening to erupt blood and pus, only to pop with brilliant blisters of makeup across his face.

It was a good thing he was asleep, and his eyes were shut so he didn't have to witness the horror unfolding underneath his eyelids. The sound of blood and pus flowing through every ounce of his head was like an egotistical tidal wave, out only to decimate what it deemed ugly. Once the blisters across his eyes had popped, he was left with a sheen of eyeliner and eyeshadow, green and sparkly enough to attract a witch's favour and a devil's wayward glance.

Bones pushed and cracked against what they were once sat next to in a cacophony of grinding. It sounded like dragging a nail across a church window, yet Chad remained with the fairies. While the hair across his body lightened and lifted off of his skin like winter leaves, his head slowly peeled its skin. It was like changing out of a pair of trousers that were too small. His head split down the middle, stopping just before his eyebrows which were now plucked to perfection. His skull seemed to beat with palpable terror, even if his mind wasn't awake to feel nor see any of it. From the untouched white of his skull jutted strands of hair. Not as you or I have them, no, his came through in giant plumes of red. It was like tinsel at Christmas, soaked in bone marrow and blood. Reems of hair shot from his head, falling around his shoulders until eventually his skin laced itself up, new holes ripping through to accommodate the follicles that rested upon his head as if it had been placed there by his own hand.

Some strands of this hair now sat atop his chest, which was shaking and pounding as if his lungs were trying to escape from their cage. His ribs pounded and cried, eventually splitting, and breaking to make way for a sheath of latex that found its way into his body through means unknowable. Corner by corner, it forced

its way out of its chest, like his very skin was flaking off. As soon as it was in the open it moulded to his chest, gripping onto the remnants of his ribs. It was like a sentient clump of glue. They proceeded to form two huge mounds, larger than would be possible for his body type should he have been born with the ability to grow what the latex was mimicking. It rose and fell to match his breaths, slowly stabilising as his body's relenting began to let him go.

Sleep once again took control, and his body was laid to rest. For the first time in what felt like months, the young man smiled in his sleep and dreamed the sweetest of dreams.

He was running after a ball.

He was the star of his football team.

He was perfect.

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Chad awoke the next morning after a dream where he was thrown across the length of a football field by the softest hands he had ever felt. Yet, he didn't wake with a start. Waking with a start indicates that you've thrown yourself through your wall to have a bodyless conversation with your neighbours. He could feel the sunlight through the window dance on his skin, he could hear the birds singing the same song they sung every morning from atop the 'Vote Roberts' banner outside his window. And yet, his eyes refused to open. It took a few minutes of trying, but eventually his eyes managed to open with less of a flutter than normal. They opened more like a fan used on some pompous, grape-eating emperor.

Despite having to prise his eyelashes open, something about this morning felt serene to the young man. The aches and pains

that usually came after a big game were missing, instead he could only feel his bed, and it was the softest thing he had ever felt. He thought he could lie like that forever, or at least until his next game. He shook his head and stretched his legs, not paying any mind to how much longer his hair was or how there was less hair across the rest of his body. The only thought on his mind was how free he felt. He caught no glances of his reflection in any surface, he didn't care to look. He just laid there, happy to feel the bed beneath him.

This was the moment even he couldn't ignore. He couldn't avoid the odd center of gravity that seemed to hold him just upright to be considered vertical. He felt his chest heavier, but he had nothing to be guilty of. He felt the duvet lift off of the bed in his stride, now a dress. A snake coiled around a body that wasn't his.

Yet, it was.

He had the same mind, same voice, same soul. But the person that seemed to radiate from Chad's reflection seemed rather to be everything Chad wasn't. He noticed that under the layers of make-up that now sat on his face, his beard stuck like a stump through forest mud.

While the chest was heavy and impractical, it could be moved up and down - likely even taken off. The dress that positively exploded from his body in a flurry of greens and pinks radiated some sort of power that he was sure he would never understand, nor would anyone fully. There wasn't much of this that he understood, but he didn't want to pay it any mind. He was in awe. He felt as though he could clutch at emotions if not for the impossibly long acrylic nails that now sat atop his fingers.

From behind his door, he could hear footsteps padding up to his room. It could have been his mother. It could have been his father. It could have been God, or Father Christmas! Yet, he

wouldn't have paid mind. No, his eyes stared back at him, examining what might've been a reflection of himself, or something wholly different, but that was where his attention needed to be.

He noticed the perfect hair.

The perfect lashes.

He noticed the perfect lips sat under his perfect nose, though he didn't notice they were smiling at what he saw.

After all, he was perfect.

# Anne of Red Cables

Charlotte Turner

Charlotte Turner is a prose writer from Cambridgeshire who is studying Creative Writing at the University of Lincoln. She specialises in fantasy and horror, and enjoys creeping out her readers as much as possible. Her hope is to one day get a novel of her own published.

*'Can't you shut it down?'*

*'This isn't like anything I've ever seen. It's running on some sort of backup power.'*

*'Stubborn thing.'*

*'Stubborn programming.'*

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I fell asleep on the school bus that morning. Most bad days started that way. It was hard enough going to school groggy and miserable but, more often than not, I'd wake up to someone prodding me or throwing rubbish at my head. One time, Matthew Lake stuck gum in my hair and I just woke up and went about my day, oblivious, until Val pulled me aside during P.E. and explained what everyone was giggling about. People seemed to laugh at me for most things, so I'd assumed my dodgeball-throwing technique was off or something.

Speaking of Val, she usually woke me up when we got to school, but she hadn't been sitting with me on the bus for a while. I was grateful for the bus driver. He woke me up with a light tap on the shoulder and a sympathetic smile, or maybe it was a grimace. Either way, I thanked him and hurried off.

It was a similar situation in morning tutor. I picked a seat that was out of the way and tried not to make it obvious that I was staring at Val. She was in the back with a couple of girls – Jane Brooks and Lola... something. Lola joined our school a couple years ago, and Miss Fleming tasked me with showing her around. I



was pretty proud of myself. I brought her to the entomology club and showed her my moth terrarium. She said it was nice. Val and I sat with her in class. I was happy to have another friend.

Until one day, Lola made friends with Jane Brooks and started pretending I didn't exist.

'You know she barely talked to us,' Val had said.

'I thought that was because she was shy,' I said.

'No, it's because y— because we're not the sort of people she wants to be friends with. But don't take it personally. She's found her crowd.'

I had no idea why anyone would consider Jane their *crowd*. Jane, the girl who insulted anyone she didn't like and threatened to stick her jailbird brother on anyone who fought back. But I supposed I dodged a bullet if Lola liked that sort of person. At least I had Val.

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*How did it even go undetected for this long?*

*What do you mean? It looks like a person, doesn't it?*

*Yeah, but it isn't one. People should've been able to tell the difference.'*

*'Guess it was pretty convincing.'*

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I didn't have Val, though. I knew some people had multiple friend groups, but I assumed that meant you'd split your time between them or something. It'd been weeks. But I didn't want Val to think I was a bitch, so I didn't ask her what was up. That was some-

thing she taught me pretty early into our time at St. Calvin's. If you thought someone had a problem with you, you didn't just ask them. That would only make things worse.

Though I believed it'd be easier if people were blunt about their feelings, Val's lesson seemed to hold true. Once I told her all about my moth project and she ignored me for the rest of the day. When everything seemed okay again and I asked her what I'd done wrong, she told me to stop making a big deal out of things and ignored me for another few days.

That was also how I learnt that most people didn't want to hear bug facts all the time.

I supposed it made sense. I'd probably upset Val in some way again. I spent the rest of morning tutor reading a book and stealing glances at her. If I left her alone, she'd come back, and things would be okay.

In the meantime, I dissected our last few interactions in my head. Maybe she was waiting for me to apologise for something.

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*'Have you gotten into the programming yet?'*

*'Yeah, it's all linked up. Have a look.'*

*'Shit, that's complicated. Glad I don't have to read through all that.'*

*'Lucky you. Have you got the reports from the witnesses?'*

*'Yep. Seems like you were right about that thing you said.'*

*'What thing?'*

*'That people could tell the difference.'*

Normally, I got nervous in the classes I had without Val. I read about a thing called scopaeesthesia – the ability to tell when someone is staring at you. When I was alone at school, it was easy to feel like everyone was watching me. It was as if being friendless alerted all the shitheads in a ten-mile radius that you were a prime target for bullying.

I used to wonder if scopaeesthesia was my superpower. Val told me I was being paranoid.

‘No,’ I’d said, ‘that’s *scopophobia*.’

Anyway, I was happy she wasn’t in most of my classes that day. It meant I could think about something else for a while. Trigonometry wasn’t an ideal distraction, but it was far better than wondering what she was gossiping about with Jane and Lola. Instead, I doodled my new hatchling, Eve, in the margin of my textbook. She was a lime hawk-moth with an ever-so-slightly damaged back leg. I helped her get out of her cocoon a few days ago. She would’ve died otherwise.

At lunch, I retreated to the library – something I hadn’t done since year seven. That was before I met Val. She was sitting in the back of the lunch hall, crying. I sat with her because there were no other seats, and asked her what was wrong because she was getting snot in her sandwich. She told me all her friends went to a different secondary school, she missed them and, to make matters worse, a boy called Matthew had stolen her lunch. I plainly told her I didn’t have friends either, and shared my food with her because I knew from personal experience that Matthew was the worst.

Somehow, that did the trick, and Val stuck with me for the years that followed. We continued to bond over how much of a

shithead Matthew was, gossiped about the girls who were mean to us, and I always let her copy off me in class. She made me think I knew how to make friends. She made me think that all the unwritten rules I couldn't understand were just fake. She made me happy.

But now, hiding out in the library, I cursed myself for thinking it could be that easy. I cursed Val, and I cursed myself for cursing her. It was a confusing battle of emotions – one side said Val hated me and there had to be some reason for it, and the other side said to stop being childish and let her do what she wanted.

It gave me a headache. But I'd lied too many times about being sick that year to try and convince the nurse to let me go home early again. Besides, my last class was biology, and I knew that would cheer me up.

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*'What's wrong?'*

*'This thing's behavioural programming... it's a mess.'*

*'Maybe we ought to keep examining the hardware.'*

*'Yeah. Oh... wait.'*

*'What?'*

*'I think it's trying to wake up.'*

*'You mean it's trying to reboot.'*

*'Yeah, that. We should try to shut it down first.'*

*'No. Leave it.'*

*'Why?'*

*'Let's ask it a few questions.'*

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The labs were on the opposite side of school from the library, so I didn't manage to get there before all the good seats were taken – no hiding in the back for me. Instead, I was forced to take a spot at the end of a bench... right next to Val. I tried to say hello, just to fill the silence, but it came out as a whispered croak. If she heard me, she didn't react, but Lola and Jane shot me glares. The lesson was off to a great start.

I forced my shoulders to relax when Ms Grey walked in and started taking the register. All I had to do was survive one hour, keep my head down, and go home. Then I could sleep and forget about this nightmare of a day.

'Now that we're finished with our human anatomy module,' Ms Grey said, powering up the projector, 'we're moving on to our next topic – evolution and adaptation. I hope you guys aren't too squeamish, because we'll be taking a *very* close look at some bugs today.'

While some of my classmates groaned, I sat up straighter. This wouldn't be so bad after all. As Ms Grey ran through the presentation, I couldn't help but drum my fingers against my chair. I already knew most of what she was saying, but the pictures and monotone recital of facts were a comfort.

White bodied peppered moths. *Biston betularia f. typica*.

Black bodied peppered moths. *Biston betularia f. carbonaria*.

Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection. *The Origin of Species*. I knew the words. *I think it would be a most extraordinary fact if no variation ever had occurred useful to each being's own welfare.*

I thought of my terrarium. I thought of how some moths disguised themselves as other creatures to avoid being eaten by predators. I wondered if that sort of mimicry could protect something from its own species.

‘Now, I’ve got something special for you,’ Ms Grey said. ‘Let’s see... Anne? You’re nearest the door, can you let the lab technician in?’

I nodded and slipped out of my seat. I recognised Maria behind the glass – she was the longest-serving staff member at St. Calvin’s, and helped out with entomology club. She smiled at me as I pulled the door open for her. I smiled back.

She was pushing a trolley with a covered tray and some tools: tweezers, pins, and a tiny scalpel. Ms Grey helped her set everything up on the teacher’s desk, and I joined the crowd when they beckoned us over to watch. I ended up next to Val again. We shuffled away from each other, putting an awkward gap between us.

‘This is the grisly part I warned you about,’ Ms Grey said.

That was my only warning before she uncovered the tray.

It was a moth. A dead moth. Pins pierced her wings, restraining her corpse as if she would somehow reanimate and fly away at any moment. But the worst part was that I *recognised* her. Lime hawk-moth. Damaged leg. Eve.

‘This specimen was kindly donated from our school’s own insect club,’ Ms Grey said. ‘So we can all thank Anne for providing us with this amazing insight into nature.’

While people snickered, Maria beamed at me. Was she proud? Why was she proud?

‘I didn’t agree to this,’ I whispered.

‘What was that?’ Ms Grey asked.

More snickering. Everyone was staring.

I raised my voice to an uncomfortable volume. ‘I said I didn’t agree to this. I raised her.’

I heard the word ‘freak’ whispered a few times but kept my eyes on Eve’s corpse. They couldn’t do this to her. Why would they

do this to her?

'I... was under the impression that you'd given us permission,' Ms Grey said.

'There must have been a miscommunication,' Maria said.

'Yeah, well...,' I was trembling, unable to talk through the lump in my throat.

After a thorny silence and incessant staring, Ms Grey turned back to the rest of the class, and to the stolen corpse in front of her.

'Well, we ought to get on with it anyway. Let's take a look at what features this moth has adapted to survive.'

She kept talking. Just chatting away with a smile on her face as she picked up the tweezers and started messing with Eve's wings. I felt like I was floating above the room as she moved Eve under the projector. Girls giggled and screamed when a close-up of her lifeless form lit up the screen.

'The bug-freak looks *pissed*, do you think that moth was her cousin or something?' Jane laughed.

I barely registered what she said. At that moment, Ms Grey picked up the scalpel and cut into Eve's body.

'Stop it,' I whispered.

Maria leaned over to me. 'You can wait outside if it's distressing, dear.'

'I don't want to wait outside. I want you to stop cutting her up.'

Ms Grey was losing her patience. 'If you have a problem with my lesson, Anne, we can discuss it later, thank you.'

'Yeah, I have a problem with it. You're cutting Eve open and pretending we're learning something, like it doesn't matter that—'

'Anne, if you're going to argue with me—'

‘Eve?’ Matthew yelled. ‘She named it?’

‘Can everyone settle down?’

Tears were welling in my eyes and I couldn’t control myself. ‘Just *stop!*’

It was too much: the glaring light from the projector, my classmates’ chatter, everyone’s glares. I fought against the tears, tried to wipe them from my eyes before they spilled over, but the damage was done and I couldn’t stop digging my grave.

‘Never seen someone this mad over a dead bug,’ Lola said, smirking.

‘How did you hang around her for so long, Valerie?’ Jane asked.

I looked up at Val, hoping for something. She was the only person that wasn’t smiling.

She shrugged. ‘Dunno. I had to check where I walked all the time in case I stepped on an ant, otherwise she’d throw a tantrum.’

The class launched into hysterics. I tried to think of something to say, but it was too much. Everything was too much. In one moment, I killed my reputation for life. I burst out into ugly sobs, all tears and snot.

The yelling continued. Ms Grey pulled me out of the classroom, but I didn’t listen to a word she said, only hearing something about calling the office as she walked off and left me.

Being alone should’ve been a comfort, but it only meant I was left with the pictures of Eve’s corpse and Val’s sneer in my head. I wanted to run, but my chest was closing in on itself.

*Why did I have to get so upset?*

*Why did I care about stupid things?*

*Why wasn’t I normal?*

My head was tight. I could still hear the commotion through



the classroom door. But I couldn't get my eyes to focus on anything anymore.

*Val's sneer. Dead moths. Grow up, Anne. Grow up.*

I started hitting my head. It was too much. Why wouldn't everything just *STOP*?

It was the last thought in my brain as my knees hit the ground and everything went black.

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I couldn't open my eyes. I could only feel cold fingers pressing against me. Against where, I couldn't tell. There was only a feeling of blankness amidst the sound of whirring machinery.

'Acknowledge that you can hear us.'

I jolted. Or rather, my abdomen did, but my limbs did nothing. Panic crashed over me and I tried my best to squirm around.

'I can't see,' I cried, 'I can't see.'

There were shuffles, a clacking keyboard, then the click of a mouse.

'I must've disconnected its optical functions,' came a man's voice, 'I'll restore them.'

'As long as that helps it cooperate.'

I had no time to think before something just popped, and I could see again. I was laying on my back, staring up at a white ceiling in a dimly lit room. I craned my head. Blue curtains surrounded me. A hospital?

Except... the two men before me didn't look like doctors. They had uneven stubble, eye bags, and were dressed in jeans and sloppy, untucked shirts. Their stares were unrelenting and I screwed my eyes shut as my blood ran cold.

‘What is this place? What’s happening?’ I said, still struggling.

They made no indication that they’d heard me. Cold fingers pressed against my throat and I tried to wrench myself away.

‘Impressive speech capability,’ the guy at the computer said. ‘Totally lifelike.’

The man that was touching me made a noise of agreement. ‘The whole thing is lifelike. No indication that anything’s wrong... not on the surface level, anyway.’

‘Please just tell me what’s going on,’ I said, not daring to open my eyes until he moved away from me.

‘*And* it’s insistent on keeping up the act. Intriguing.’

‘That it is. Shall we begin questioning?’

‘I think so.’ A desk chair wheeled towards me. ‘Look at me and state your name.’

I looked at him, at the computer-guy. He had greasy hair and he smelled like coffee.

‘Anne,’ I said.

He looked at his partner, then back at me. ‘What about your model number?’

‘My what? What’s going on? Are you guys doctors?’

‘Your model number,’ he repeated. ‘AN-16-E. Does that ring a bell?’

‘Don’t be idiomatic, it might not understand,’ the other guy said.

Computer-guy laughed. ‘AN-16-E. Is that your model number?’

‘What model?’ I said. ‘Please, you’re scaring me. Can you call my mum or something? I should be home from school, she’s probably worried, I—’

‘...your... mother?’ computer-guy asked, then wheeled back over to his desk.

The other one, the tall man, stepped towards me again. I flinched.

‘Maybe we should take a different approach,’ he said, ‘AN-16-E. *Anne*. You don’t have a mother. Or a family. We know what you are, so you ought to start cooperating with us now, okay?’

As he spoke, he moved his hand. I tensed, following it with my eyes until he stopped to point at my stomach.

Every thought, question or protest drained away at what I was seeing. My school shirt had been rolled up over my stomach, but instead of skin, there was a gap. An opening. My stomach was opened like a hatch and there was a mess of red underneath. Thin wires ran and tangled like wormy intestines, there were parts that spun and pumped, and it was all *inside me*.

I began screaming. ‘What did you do to me? What is this? Let me out of here. *SOMEONE LET ME OUT OF HERE!*’

‘Anne,’ the tall man said. My name stuck in his mouth like he didn’t know what it meant. ‘There’s no use in resisting or lying. We’re going to go over some questions now, and you need to answer them. What are you?’

My arms and legs were bolted down. Not that it mattered, I couldn’t feel anything in them anyway. A box of tools, of spanners, hammers, and screwdrivers, sat by the desk.

‘I’m human,’ I pleaded. ‘I’m a person, I’m a schoolgirl. I don’t understand, *please—*’

The tall man’s frustration was apparent. I screamed as he pulled my shirt away, revealing another cavity in my chest. I could feel my heart thrumming and pounding but there was no heart there. I was empty. I was wires.

‘You *aren’t* human,’ he said. ‘Our best guess is that you’re a robot. An android, to be precise. But you’re not a person, you’re mimicking a person. Understand?’

‘No,’ I sobbed. ‘Please, please let me go home. I wanna go home.’

‘Hm, we’re looking into that,’ computer-guy said. ‘Your so-called home destination. Can you tell us more about that? Who do you report to?’

‘No one, I’m telling you—’

The tall man slammed his hand on the desk. ‘You must be reporting to someone. You must come from somewhere. You’re a fucking android, a perfect imitation of a human, just strolling around in a school, giggling with your friends, growing each year like a tumour. There has to be a point to it, so spit it out. Tell us.’ He loomed over me. ‘What. Are. You? A government experiment? Did the Russians send you or something, huh? An alien? A mad scientist project gone wrong?’

I couldn’t move to wipe away the tears that blurred my eyes. ‘I’m a person, I’m a human being. I swear I don’t know what you’re talking about.’

‘Bullshit.’ He turned to his partner. ‘Keep searching the code for information. I’ll get it to talk.’

He grabbed a pair of pliers from the toolbox. My voice gave out as he plunged his hands into my body. There was pain, and then blankness again, and I could not comprehend it. My anxiety-induced stomach aches had always been coming from nowhere. My uncoordinated limbs were... what? Programming?

My mind.

My being.

Myself.

It was code. It was wires.

I couldn't help but keep screaming as he messed with my insides – with the circuitry.

'Why are you so insistent on pretending?' he demanded.

'It's not pretending, it's not—'

*Snap.* He cut a wire. Something sparked, something that must've been part of me, and my whole body started flickering between nauseating agony and nothingness. I feared the latter more.

Was he right? Was it pretending? Did some small part of me know, the entire time, that I wasn't like anyone else? Why did I always try so desperately to hide that?

He went on. 'Why did you shut down? Was it an error?'

'Shut down?'

'We found you at the hospital,' he said. 'Your poor teacher. The doctors. Everyone was worried sick about you when you *passed out*. They couldn't understand when they brought you in and something was just... off. There was no blood to test, that was the first clue.'

'I don't know what—'

He gave no warning before he cut another wire. This time, his partner grabbed him by the shoulder, but he slapped him away.

'You'll break her,' computer-guy warned.

'I don't care if I break it. I'll make it talk.'

My vision clouded. My sobs were hoarse. Was that what it was? All those times when I got too upset about things, it was my programming, unable to process it all?

'Last chance,' the tall man said. 'Tell us everything you know. Now.'

'I... I'm...' I stuttered, shocked at the grating quality my voice had taken on as my body, my functions shut down. 'I go to school.'

I go home. That's it, that's all I do. I don't talk to anyone. I don't hurt anyone, I promise. I'm not spying, or collecting information, or trying to blend in... I-I— maybe I am, but not on purpose. You have to believe me, I didn't know. I didn't know what I was.'

He held up another wire. Desperation surged through me.

'I thought I was a person, please, it's the truth, I swear! I didn't know what was wrong with me, I thought— I thought I was just— I didn't know what I was doing wrong, *please. I DON'T WANNA DIE! I JUST WANT THIS TO BE OVER, I WANT TO BE NORMAL!*

He scoffed and shook his head at me. I didn't know what it was supposed to mean. I didn't understand what I'd said wrong. In the next instant, he snapped another wire, and my body couldn't take it.

A series of spasms overtook what little parts of me still had sensation in them. The metallic, coffee smell clicked out of existence, then I couldn't hear my own cries anymore. The men's argument faded out of clarity, and soon the sight of them did too. I couldn't see my body. I couldn't feel it.

As I went to sleep for the last time, I wondered if Val would forgive me for being different, and difficult, and wrong, if she knew I was built that way after all.

# Death is a Bus Stop

Brontë-May Jenkinson

Brontë-May Jenkinson is a poet, writer and artist based in Lincoln, currently studying Creative Writing at Lincoln university. She is a book lover and medieval enthusiast, who hopes to use her interests towards a master's degree and a published collection of poems and art.

Death is a lot like waiting. It's the edges of sleep, the gap between waking up and dozing. It's easy to forget life was more than this endless mundanity. I think boredom is a ghost's best friend. It hangs around like those keys you can't find. I'm certainly more bored than I'm dead, but far more dead than I ever was before. Death is a bus stop you sit at an hour too long; a coffee going cold in your hands as you wait. Death is walking forever in a world you don't belong in, trying to find the will to stay.

On what I'm assuming is a workday, I sit in the middle of an office and watch the company printer. As far as I'm concerned, it's the heart of the business, if a heart is slowly chugging along and mostly ignored. Every time someone scans a document, I wonder what it would be like to have my lid lifted, to be seen and used. I get walked through at noon by the whole office as they swarm out for lunch. At the end, it's just me and the printer. A standoff of sorts. I think the printer is the only thing that knows what death is like.

Later, I see another ghost kneeling on the pavement, scooping her possessions into a handbag that has died with her. I sit beside her, so close I can see her laddered tights and hear her laboured breaths. When she finishes, she looks at me confused, before holding her bag upside down and shaking. Lipsticks roll over the concrete, and coins scatter all around us. Then she gets to work, picking it all up again. I bend forward and watch her repeat this cycle for an hour straight. Shake, pick up, shake, pick up...

I want to see hunger again, so I go to a sushi restaurant. I sit, cross-legged, over California rolls as they rotate on the conveyor belt. We move together around the restaurant, hands reaching through me every few minutes. I want to be paraded around and chosen to be eaten; I want my plate to be picked up. I get dizzy



after a while, so I roll off as we pass the kitchen. Men in white line up in rows, chopping and assembling. They could almost be ghosts, like I could almost be sushi. But they are alive, and I'm not even here.

In a park that is full of the dead, a soldier stands at the gates. I am glad to find him standing like a nutcracker, smiling but wanting to bite down. I take my place by his side, sitting sweetly. He never looks at me, only stands still like the stone woman on top of the fountain. Sometimes, I think the soldier can't see me at all, or he is just my imaginary friend all dressed up in red. I stay until I grow bored of being alone with him, leaving with only a gentle kiss pressed to his unmoving cheek.

There's a corner store at the side of the park, old and cramped; I like to lie on the shelves and watch people shop. A woman comes in every time the cans are stocked. I like to be wedged right behind the tins so I can watch her buy tomato every time. She puts her hand right through me to grab a tin of chicken noodle, as if she'd break routine. I wish I was the soup in her belly like she is the warmth in my chest, sitting like understanding, or heartburn. It's like she sees me and knows ghosts need to be touched.

At night, the houses line up like sodden shoes. Their gardens' growing toys and weeds, rusted swing sets and knocked-over bins. A translucent girl pushes herself back-and-forth in time with the rattling frame. I sit on the seat beside her, launch and let go. My body acts like it remembers this, though my eyes never leave the girl. We stare at each other as we shove ourselves higher and higher in synchronised swings. I think I was a girl once and that's all she's ever going to be. I stay with her until dawn, when she fades into the morning fog.

On a different day I jump into the river and swim with the swans. They move like I do, aimless and wandering. I think swans

are closer to ghosts than real people are. That nothingness mixed with rage, that elegance mistaken for calm. It took me a while to realise they could see me. A lone bird presses his feathered head to my own as I tread in the dirty water. I meet his black eyes and think of heartbeats and co-codamol. I want to flap invisible wings, to scare and to be scared. I feel death like feathers under my skin.

There's a ghostly mime outside the park who entertains nobody. A busker a few streets down gets thrown coins over and over by the dead girl in green. Would it be better if they knew each other, if she applauded the mime for their never-ending performance, if translucent coins hit the fake glass box for the rest of eternity? It's the petty things that makes me want to go home. The mime likes when I watch, perks up for me like a dog. I feel guilty when I leave, like I'm supposed to sit forever by the invisible rope they pull.

I watch an empty pushchair whilst a woman nurses her baby. I want to hold something small, to make something precious. How can a thing be trusted with carrying a child more than a ghost? In my head, I am sturdy and warm. I watch her hands stroke the soft head, like the way regret cradles the dead. I slide behind her and wrap my body around hers. I am her ghostly pushchair, only less grey and without wheels. When she gets up, I stay behind, holding the air like she holds her child.

There's an old man who likes to talk. He's dead but moves out of the way for women and children like they can see him. He asks me about what I've seen, collecting my memories like seashells. I forget sometimes that I am not alone in this city, that ghosts roam alongside me. He walks with me in comfortable silence, like the father I've forgotten. He's dead in the same way roadkill is alive. Quietly understanding something is wrong, looking into the bright lights and hoping they swerve.

As time goes by, I notice litter more than I used to. It builds up now, framing benches and stairs. The city grows emptier, a cocoon of muffled life. When there is nobody left to see me, I'll know that it's time. I find the biggest road and watch paper float across empty lanes. Receipts and packets rustle until they sound like a machine. The world has gone dark, like a fizzled-out streetlamp. I step out hoping to be hit, a last act of defiance that might sever all my ties. In the distance, there is a shelter that shouldn't be there.

It is darker still, when I sit at the bus stop. No lights flicker on, and the stars barely shine now. There are no leaves on the trees, and I feel my feet for the first time. I am cold. I never knew how to be a quiet ghost, to settle and to be. I am not surprised when the bus pulls up empty apart from its driver. A hand reaches down, pale, but bright in the night. We speed through the city, past swings and sushi places. I see the printer in my mind's eye, following me like a stray dog. The soldier looks up as we pass.

I used to want to stay, but I'm not so sure now.

# Remember. Admit. Identify

*Acasia Rose*

Acasia Rose is a Peterborough-born writer. She is currently in her final year of BA Creative Writing in Lincoln. Specialising in Romance, she adores incorporating love stories into genres like Contemporary Fiction, Fantasy and Science Fiction. When she isn't writing, you'll find her with a book and a fresh coffee.

We are Grade E.

*We* includes the man who screams, the woman who cries, the girl that pleas.

They hate it.

*Hate. Hate. Hate it.*

*E for Experiments.*

Words are like a ball, kicked from one net to the other at a violent speed. Their mouths, then mine. Theirs. Mine. Theirs. Mine.

I don't know how long it's been. Memories of my first cell return; the white lines tallying how many sunsets I've witnessed are probably long gone. Counting my sleeps is now my only way of telling the time, though some days feel longer than others.

Someone is knocking. The cushions of my room soften my fall as I sit, the similar cushions on the walls holding me close as I hide in the corner of my padded paradise. Three people enter. One looks larger than the others. More important. More disgusting. He walks closer, stretching thick white fingers towards my arms, which are hugging my limbs together.

'Move.' His voice tears through the silence of my mind, setting them free.

*He'll kill you.*

*Or us.*

*We're already dead.*

My arms shake and I force my back further into the cushioned walls.

'Move her,' the man says, nudging his head to the two behind him. They reach over, iron grips peeling me away from the walls

of comfort.

*Fight it.*

*No, don't.*

*He'll kill you...*

'Shut up,' I mutter, as I stare at the white below my feet.

I say nothing else as the men drag me away from the soft floors and force my bare feet to prod against the corridor's concrete.

The asylum's interior contradicts the patients inside. Bland grey floors, white walls and blue doors covering everywhere I can see. Though, we inside are far from bland colours and simple corridor layouts. The cold bites into my skin, my toes mourning the loss of warmth from my cushions. The voices going still behind my forehead as I attempt to figure out where I'm being taken. Two lefts, a right, then another left. We're going to...

*The shower rooms.*

The young girl's voice echoes inside my thoughts as she speaks to me, reminding me of her haunting presence in my mind, created by my own guilt.

Drip.

I look up, wondering if the noise is another hallucination.

Drip.

A familiar blue metal door appears as we turn a corner, the scent of mould and damp cloth surrounding us. The two holding me force the door open.

Drip.

Is someone still in there?

Metal scrapes on concrete as the door opens, revealing a lady dressed in an all-white doctor's uniform. The dim lights make her slick brunette bun shimmer, her smile a fake white. We enter the room.

‘Follow me, sweet,’ the lady says, her voice sickly.

I look up at the two men holding my arms, the third waiting outside, wondering if they’re going to follow us as well – if they want to see what this woman will do to me.

The lady looks up at the men, nudging her head toward the door. ‘Leave us. She won’t hurt me.’

I watch them look at me, two pairs of deep brown eyes glaring into my soul like they can see the three infiltrating my mind, before nodding and waiting outside.

‘He wishes to see you,’ she says, walking across the blue tiled floor toward a shower cubicle.

‘Who?’ I ask, following her, wishing for my voice to be louder than a mumble.

‘You’ll soon find out. Please shower.’

The lady pulls back the white curtain, gesturing for me to enter. I blink at her for a second, before the voices chant into my mind to strip and shower.

I watch the lady leave the shower rooms as I start to undress myself. Soap, a cloth and two towels sit on a small wooden bench in the cubicle, ready for me as I pull the curtain further back and turn the shower on. Lukewarm water drips onto the tiled floor, the sound bouncing around the cubicle. The air pricks at my skin, so I hurry to stand under the water while my mind is at peace.

Minutes later, I wrap the towel around my body, the shower doing little to make me feel clean. The lady returns with some clothes and another woman. ‘Lucy will help you get ready,’ she says. ‘We have ten minutes.’ And the ten minutes are taken by Lucy’s powders, shadows, blush, and mascara as she plasters my face.

My grey sweatpants and shirt are disregarded and replaced with pristine white ones, my feet finally hiding in plimsoles. ‘She’s

ready,' Lucy says, her bronze fingers twirling my black hair into a braid over my shoulder. She holds a circular mirror in front of me, allowing me to see the new person staring back at me.

*We're pretty.*

*We're strange.*

*We're different...*

The lady nods, looking me up and down with beady eyes. 'Good. Let's go.'

We leave the shower room; the two men from earlier are ready with guns as the lady escorts us down a corner I haven't turned before. The third man is gone.

*Where? Where? Where?*

*Who?*

*Help...*

'Stop,' I mutter, dropping my eyes to the white shoes on my feet. I count my steps as a distraction.

'Are they talking?' the lady asks, brown eyes sweeping over my face. 'What are they saying?'

*No. No. No.*

*Leave. Run.*

*Pretty...*

Father, mother, daughter. Voices. Their voices. I inhale, looking at the lady before nodding. 'Too much,' I whisper. 'They're saying too much.'

'Like what?'

'Where are we going?' I ask, wondering if her answer will soothe their loudness.

'You know, sweet. To meet him.'

I suck in my next inhale before panic sets. 'Who?'

The lady smiles while guiding me through the unfamiliar lay-



out. We reach a set of stairs, which she doesn't hesitate to make me climb. A metal door sits at the top and I wonder if they're taking me outside. If they will set me, the man, the woman and the daughter free.

'Sorry sweet,' the lady says as I reach her side. The two men move their grips from their guns to my arm. "This shouldn't hurt."

*NO.*

*RUN.*

*STOP.*

My eyes widen, my heart racing into my throat as the lady approaches me while pulling out a gun-like device I can't name. I thrash against the men holding me.

*Run. You need to run.*

*Leave!*

*Pain...*

The device presses against my neck, my skin stinging before darkness grows from the corner of my vision and my knees buckle.

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I open my eyes.

*Where?*

*No cushions!*

*Help...*

I see the light before the walls. My arms are strapped to a chair, feeling the pressure around my wrists before I see it. Then I hear the hiss of a door to my left and the lady returns with an unfamiliar man.

The white walls around me turn purple and blue as the man

presses a button beside the door. I blink, wondering if this is another hallucination or if the man's technology is this advanced. The lady smiles at me as they walk closer. 'This is Knox,' she says. 'He's who wanted to see you.'

Knox walks forward, the pale colours of his appearance hiding behind the purple and blue colours filling the room. He stands in front of me, looking me up and down before nodding. 'Let's hope you don't fail me too,' he says, turning to face the opposite way.

Movement comes from behind me as two others place a helmet of cold metal and wires on my head. 'What is this?' I ask, before the three voices inside my head can scream their confusion.

Knox smiles, an eerie look glistening in his eyes. 'I hope you're the one we need,' he says.

'For what?'

'Start the system,' Knox says, his voice bold.

A buzzing fills my ears, soon becoming a high-pitched ringing as the voices return to their shouts of fear. Then, I hear them. External. Outside of my mind?

Three figures appear in front of me and Knox, the lady moving to stand behind the chair I'm in. I watch the figures as they, one by one, look at me. My throat constricts.

It's them.

'Who is who?' Knox asks me, keeping his eyes on the three. I dart my stare to each one, wondering how they are standing so freely.

*Tell him.*

I look at the male figure as his voice echoes both inside and outside of my head, holographic eyes wide as his purple body flickers through the blue lights. It's him. He died. Why is he here?

How can they see him too?

‘Who is it?’ Knox repeats, not moving his eyes from the younger girl crouching on the floor.

‘How can you see them?’ I ask, darting my gaze around the room.

Knox watches me before sighing. ‘The helmet works as a projector,’ he starts, turning toward me with his arms crossed over his chest. ‘It takes the signals from your brain as it creates the hallucinations, and projects it. The purple light just makes it clearer to the naked eye.’

I shake my head, the helmet adding weight to the movement. They can see inside my head? My wrists press against the metal cuffs tying them to the chair, my panic not strong enough to free them.

‘Now,’ Knox says after a moment, watching me with amusement. ‘Who are they?’

‘It’s them,’ I whisper, that night flashing through my mind, making the three figures glare at me. ‘It’s that family.’

‘The ones you killed?’

The three have murder in their eyes, and I wonder if they can destroy my mind. ‘Yes.’

Knox nods, walking toward the figures. ‘What are their names?’ he asks me. My breathing quickens. ‘Say their names.’

‘Connor Ryle, Adalynn Ryle,’ I mutter, my wrist straining against the straps to point at the two older figures. Then, I look at the young girl glaring from the corner, hatred boring into me. ‘And Naomi Ryle.’

‘Do you know how old Naomi was when she died?’ Knox asks, his voice grating over my sanity. ‘She was thirteen.’

‘I know.’

I watch the girl look around, before lowering her chin to rest on her knees.

*You did this...*

She says into my mind, her mouth moving with the words.

Knox walks closer to the flickering figure in the corner. ‘Can you hear me?’ I want to scream at her. To tell her to not answer.

Naomi nods, the motion making my head dizzy.

A grim smile spreads across Knox’s lips as he peers behind himself to look at me. ‘Do you know her name?’

Naomi shakes her head, the dizziness worsening.

‘Interesting.’ Knox stands and turns to face me. He studies me as I fight to keep my vision from blurring. ‘Do you know your name?’

I suck in a breath and say, ‘Experiment forty-three.’

He laughs, pinching the bridge of his nose as he smiles. ‘Your name. Not your number.’

‘E-F-T.’

Knox shakes his head before looking at the figures of Connor, Adalynn and Naomi. ‘She forgot herself to remember you. Isn’t that sweet?’

Phantom burns prickle my skin, the smell of smoke and heat fills my nose. My heart returns to my throat, beating too fast for my lungs. Sweat beads drip down my forehead, my wrists fighting against the restraints tying me to this chair.

Knox huffs. ‘Take her back,’ he says. ‘She passed, but she’ll be no use if her memory is hazy.’ He gives me one last look as he stands by the door. ‘Dig deep into that little mind of yours and remember who you are, then we can continue this talk.’

The two behind me remove the helmet, and the figures flicker into nothing. It takes a second for the dizziness to subside. The

lady stands in front of me, a smile revealing her too-white teeth, before she pulls out her device and my vision is taken from me again.

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I'm back in my padded paradise. The cushion's comfort calling me as I crawl toward the corner. I'm still in my white clothes, my face bare and clean.

'Awake? Good.' Knox's amplified voice startles me as it bounces around the room. 'Tell them your name,' he continues, 'so we can meet again.' I look around the room, finding a new black speaker in the top left corner. 'Until then, E-F-T'

Everything goes still. The family in my mind aren't pestering me. Did he silence them by making me say their names?

It's silent for too long. I count too many sleeps full of nothing but my own haunting memories. My dreams returning to the nightmares of flames, smoke and three pain-filled screams. I lose count of my sleeps; too busy figuring out who I was before these cushioned walls took me in to recall if we're still in single digits. I look around the room again, digging into my memories to find my name. Adalynn's face flashes in front of me, her voice returning as she screams.

*Tell me your name!*

I blink, again and again and again, but her lifeless brown eyes won't disappear as she screams. I look to my left and see Naomi hiding in the corner. To my right, Connor is pacing around the room. He's mumbling, pulling his hair, scratching his greenish skin.

*Your name.*

It's Naomi that says this into my mind, her voice bouncing

around my memories of the fire I caused.

*Tell me your name.*

I look at her, feeling her voice like talons across my brain as we search my mind together. I recall familiar voices, both deep and high-pitched, the happiness of my past.

*She's got a lot going on at the moment.*

*I wonder if she'll make it into college.*

*Where is she?*

*...come here!*

'I don't know my name...' I whisper, the faces to those memories hazy. I squeeze my eyes shut, allowing Naomi's presence to remind me of anything before coming here. How long has it been? Where am I?

*Remember...*

*Admit...*

*Identify...*

I shove my fingers into my hair, ripping and tugging and grasping at anything I can think of. I stand from my corner, my breathing running me breathless. Thinking. Thinking. Thinking.

*Remember.*

Connor's wandering with me, his figure becoming a visual I see everywhere.

*Admit!*

I look to my left, where Adalynn stares at me as she stands beside her own dead body. Midnight black hair sways in phantom wind.

Naomi's young eyes are next to meet mine, hiding behind brown hair.

*Identify...*

My inhaleds are too quick for my exhaleds, sweat covering me as

my cushions no longer surround the walls but close in on me. I'm fighting my own mind, Adalynn and Connor's voices screaming at me as Naomi's young dead eyes follow every move I make.

I need to remember. To allow them rest. To keep myself from falling. Remember. Admit. Identify. Rememb...admi...iden... My vision blurs. Rem...adm..ide...

R...

A...

I...

I gasp, the voices clearing in my head, the smoke leaving my nose, the burns walking away from my skin.

'Rai.'

Everything stills. Adalynn stops screaming and Connor stops moving. Naomi looks at me from her corner... Smiling. Then they all disappear.

I'm alone for minutes after that.

'Well done,' Knox says, his voice exiting the black speaker and making me jump.

I'm standing in the centre of my room, eyes wide and hands full of sweat as I look at the speaker. 'My name is Rai.'

'Yes, it is.' He's silent for a second, muffled words filling the room before Knox continues. 'Already, you've done far better than the others. I shall see you tomorrow, Rai.'

He goes quiet, and I'm alone again.

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Tomorrow comes, and I'm given no time to consider what is happening. The same three men return, walking me down the same corridors to the shower room. I wash and change into clean white

clothes, before Lucy fixes my tired features with her powders and mascara.

I don't speak during the walk up the stairs, too busy wondering why this route isn't upsetting the family this time. The lady doesn't press anything against my neck. I'm awake as one of the three men scans his card and the door hisses open.

Knox greets us as we reach a room of glass walls. The man to my right opens the door and the lady and I enter. Knox gestures for me to walk over, having the three armed men leave my side as I reach his. Now, in brighter light, I see the blond strands of his hair and how they cover his tanned forehead. Hazel eyes gleaming at me. 'Down there,' he says, pointing at glass tank of blue water, 'is how you're going to help us save thousands.'

'What?' I follow Knox as he opens a different glass door and descends down a set of stairs.

His grin returns. 'Passing those small tests is all I needed from you,' he says, his voice low. 'Now we know you're ready.'

We stare at each other, his eyes glistening with excitement as I stare back with worry. Then he blinks and continues to walk toward the water tank. Members of a crew, all dressed in white lab coats, meet him by the glass. One looks at me, a frown on his face before he walks away.

'Ready for what?' I ask, frustration slowly building. 'Stop avoiding my questions, or I won't help you.'

Knox raises an eyebrow at my sudden threat, but it doesn't dim the gleam in his eyes. 'The government wants another way to prove if someone is guilty of their crimes or not,' Knox starts, gesturing for a man to walk toward him.

'Are we getting started right away?' a man says, handing Knox a clipboard.



Knox nods, turning back to me as he says, ‘They came to me with this pitch, and I promised them a way to visualise the memories of the offender.’ He places his hand on the small of my back and walks me toward the tank. ‘I’ve been working on that helmet for years now, Rai. And your mind has been the only one that didn’t fry under its electrical currents.’

My stomach clenches as I watch small bubbles dance around the blue water. ‘You’ve killed others too?’

Knox stiffens at my question, but he’s quick to recover by folding his arms over his chest. ‘They’re criminals like you, sweet. Murderers of innocents. They deserved what was coming for them.’

‘But you—’

‘We’ve been waiting for this moment, Rai,’ Knox cuts in as two others take my wrists and tie thick, black rubber straps around them. ‘Now the poor Ryle family can get the confirmation they need.’ I struggle against the straps, hissing at the tightness, as the mention of the Ryle family makes my thoughts shake. ‘You killed them, and you will pay for it.’

*You killed us.*

*You took us away from them.*

*You did this.*

They’re back, running a riot of ricocheting words and memories. Knox grabs my sweating arms, shouting orders as a woman pulls the straps and forces me to follow her. I’m thrashing again. Pulling and tugging away from those who try to touch me. There are too many. Too many arms and hands and fingers and voices.

*We deserve to know.*

*We deserve to rest.*

*You deserve to die.*

‘Please, don’t!’ My voice shakes as I’m strapped to a metal sheet by my waist and ankles, the same black wires restricting my movements. An oxygen mask covers my mouth and nose, making each breath heavier as the air, contaminated with an unfamiliar lavender scent, flows into my lungs. The helmet reappears, a protective plastic wrapping around it. I shake my head at the woman as she walks closer. There’s a hint of sorrow in her gaze, before she blinks it away and ties the helmet onto my head.

Knox watches as his crew inject multiple unfamiliar liquids into me. Too many needles split my skin at the same time before I feel nothing, and the screams of my hallucinations are gone.

‘I’m sorry, my dear,’ Knox says, his voice blurring behind a wall of unconsciousness. ‘We need you unconscious for the memories to be clear.’ I hear a sinister giggle and Naomi appears beside Knox. ‘We won’t kill you. You’ll just be sleeping for a very long time.’

I can’t talk. My fingers are tingling, and I can feel every dribble of blood running down my arms from the pricks of those needles.

‘It’s ready, sir,’ someone says behind me. Knox nods and my body is being lifted. The wires whine under my weight but hold me steady as they lift me into the air and above the tank. I give anyone that will look at me a final pleading expression.

‘Lower her.’ Knox’s voice swims around my messy thoughts, Naomi, Adalynn, and Connor’s faces flickering beside Knox as my body is submerged into the tank.

The water is cool, not uncomfortable, but my panic has me thrashing inside the enclosed space. The pricks on my arm from the needles sting and I become aware of everything seeping into me. Blue water, contaminated oxygen, mindless spirals of the three faces swimming around my vision before that’s taken too, by my

closing eyelids and the water now on my face.

‘Goodnight, my dear.’ Knox’s voice is distant, muffled through the water. ‘Sleep well, Rai. My Grade Excellent experiment.’

My sight turns black, my body numb, and everything I’ve thought about in the years after my life changed becomes someone else’s thoughts. The light behind my eyelids fizzles into darkness, the tingles in my fingers and toes disappearing and my thoughts become sluggish. Now I am to sleep. For how long? I don’t know. My hallucinations are disappearing from my memories, and I start to wonder if eternal rest is as bad as I thought.

# The Price of Peace

Daisy Hall

Daisy Hall is an English writer from Doncaster. She is currently working towards her BA in Creative Writing at the University of Lincoln. When she's not reading the latest Romantasy novel, you'd likely find her playing Valorant on her PC.

The carpet beneath my feet is soaked in blood – a deep crimson, spreading like a slow poison. The clock on the wall reads 4:30pm. Has it really only been fifteen minutes? I suppose the lack of sirens means nobody had heard the gunshot either. *Brilliant, at least one thing is in my favour today.*

I glance at the mess in front of me, debating the idea of picking up the gun from the floor and turning it on myself. It would make this a hell of a lot easier. At least I wouldn't be around to deal with the consequences of my actions, but that would mean all this would have been for nothing.

The body in front of me is a body I know well. A little too well, it helped to give me my two children –

*Fuck.*

It's a tricky thing to try to explain to your children that the man they love and admire is not who they think he is. In my world he is so different to the picture he paints of himself. It's not like they were ever awake when he shows his true colours. I guess that side of him was something special he reserved for me, and me alone.

I feel like my taste in men should be studied, as if somehow, I've perfected the art of choosing those who can hide their darkness behind a cheap smile, and a reduced bouquet of Walmart's own roses. Maybe it's a flaw I don't want to acknowledge, or maybe I've become numb to it... Either way there's a lesson in it somewhere, though right now, I'm not sure I want to learn what it is.

I double take when I catch my reflection in the mirror above the sofa. The woman staring back at me looks like myself, but there was a hard edge to her now, a quiet fierceness that hadn't been

there before. I don't know whether to be afraid of her or proud of what she's becoming.

I swallow hard, time for self-reflection has to come later, I have more pressing matters at hand. Such as the body that is still on the floor, and the blood that is pooling around the gaping hole in its skull. I'm not strong enough to do anything other than drag the body to the kitchen so I can attempt to save what's left of the carpet.

I locate a carrier bag to place over the head of the body so that the blood doesn't smear across the floor. As I pull the bag over his face and start to tie the handles around his neck, my fingers begin to tremble. My neck feels tender to the touch, the skin beneath my fingertips – still bruised, still sore.

His hands now lie limp and lifeless by his side, unable to hurt anyone ever again. I squeeze my eyelids shut, blocking out the memory. But I can still feel the pressure around my throat as if he is still there, choking me from the inside.

I can't afford to lose my head now. Without thinking about it, I grab his feet and begin to drag him across the room. I reach the door to the kitchen. Maybe I should've listened when he suggested having an open plan layout, at least I wouldn't have the hassle of getting his gigantic body through the doorway.

Funny how easily this all flips, isn't it? How one minute you're at his mercy, the one who has always been small beneath his shadow, and the next you're dragging his corpse across your floor.

Finally, I get all of him in the kitchen, the cool tiles underfoot offering more of a relief than they should. I assess my surroundings, trying to figure out the next best move.

The fridge? Too obvious.

The cupboards? Too small.

The pantry? That could work.

Rushing over to the other end of the kitchen I try the door handle to the pantry: it doesn't budge. Makes sense, since I reckon it's been opened maybe three times in the last five years. I pull at the door again and it moves a couple of centimetres. How hard do I have to pull this damned door? I yank it as hard as I can, and it doesn't just open all the way, it fucking falls off.

Now I'm stuck in the kitchen with my dead husband, a single pantry door, and 10 minutes before my children get home. Honestly, picking up the gun earlier might've been the better choice.

I had one option left. The riskiest option of them all. I guess I had to phone a friend

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'You did what?'

Julia knew that the relationship I had with my husband hadn't been brilliant. She didn't quite know the extent of how terrible it had been, but she knew enough to know that it wasn't all sunshine and rainbows.

'You know it was bad, I did what I had to.'

Now I said it out loud, I wasn't sure whether I *had* to but I sure as hell knew that if it wasn't him on the floor with a hole in his skull, it would have been me.

'Fuck Sonya. There's bad, and then there's this. I'm coming over. I'll get Pete to take your kids to ours for dinner.'

'Okay. Just whatever you do, don't tell Pete about any of this right now, make something up. I need time to get myself together.'

Pete is a cop. He is also the husband of my best friend. He's a nice enough guy, but that's all there is to say about him. How a

woman as fierce and outgoing as Julia ended up with the human equivalent of plain oatmeal was, and still is, beyond me.

‘You don’t need to worry, Sonya. I could tell Pete we had won the lottery and he wouldn’t bat an eyelid. That man is more emotionally unavailable than the Wi-Fi at a cabin in the woods.’

I had to give it to her, she was right. However, I still have a body. Jokes about Pete would have to wait.

‘As much as I love you and appreciate your humour,’ I glance at the clock, ‘Now is really not the time.’

‘Got it, on my way.’

Before I can say another word, the phone call ends.

Julia lives a two-minute walk down the road, and by that logic she would be able to intercept my kids before they reach the front door and hand them over to Pete, who loves spending time with them – likely because Julia cannot have kids of her own. I know how much that has impacted her life, as I know she would be a brilliant mother. That is why I made sure my kids loved the both of them like family.

Despite her constant jokes at his expense, she loves Pete more than she would ever admit. Hell, I’ve been jealous of their relationship since they met. It’s hard not to be when my reality consisted of being shackled up with an abuser for the last eleven years. Compared to that, it makes Pete and Julia’s relationship seem downright dreamlike.

The abrupt knock on the door startles me out of my thoughts. *Damn, Julia got here fast.* I walk out of the kitchen and back through the lounge, making sure to walk up to the window to double check that my best friend is standing outside and not the entire police force.

Julia’s auburn hair clings to her face in wisps. Her eyes are



concerned and the tension in her shoulders is obvious, but the second she sees me looking through the window, all that melts away. She's here to help, whatever this is, whatever mess I've gotten myself into, she's ready to dive headfirst into it with me, no hesitation.

I rush towards the front door and unlock it; Julia steps inside, her eyes wide at the sight of the carpet. I slam the door shut behind her and we stand in silence for a minute.

'So, you really did it huh?' She huffs out a nervous laugh as she speaks.

'It was me or him.' I pause, before saying what I was one hundred percent certain of. 'One of us was going to die today.'

As soon as the words leave my mouth, I replay the moment it all happened in my head.

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He stood in front of me, a crazed look in his eyes. My head throbbed with a dull, relentless ache from his fist. His blows painting my body in shades of rage. For the most part, he kept the places that could be seen by others untouched, with the exception of my neck, but that only seemed to be when he had gotten too angry. Everywhere else on my body was a collage of purple and red... I suppose he did always say red looked good on me.

'You didn't do as you were told.' His voice was low and edged with a quiet fury. Each word is laced with a barely contained rage that made the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end. It was the kind of voice that promised consequences shuffled backward trying to escape him, but he stomped down on the hem of my jeans, pinning me in place.

'You never fucking listen!'

His voice was getting louder, and angrier. There was a time years ago I would've been petrified, knowing the change in his voice was a one-way ticket to trouble, and I was still scared, but significantly less so. The regularity of these situations made me almost numb to the feeling.

'Apologise to me.' His eyes studied my face, but I wasn't letting my fear show, he relished in my fear, and I refuse to let him get even a taste of it.

'I'm sorry,' I said.

Had I meant it? I wasn't sure I meant it in the way he wanted me to mean it. However, I was apologetic for ever letting this man into my life.

'I don't believe you.' I didn't have time to think before his hands were around my neck.

They squeezed hard, almost to the point of blackout, and then they would ease for a few seconds; allowing me a few sweet breaths before he would squeeze his fingers tighter, causing me to slip close to unconsciousness again. He would repeat it over and over, his sick way of showing me who was in control. Then he let me go, watching in satisfaction as my body crumpled to the floor.

That was when I remembered. A few years ago, my husband and I had argued about owning a gun. I told him I didn't want the kids anywhere near a gun. He told me I had no choice in the matter. Perhaps it was a good idea that he had been so firm in his decision, as the gun in question was in a drawer right next to me. I knew what I needed to do. If I didn't act, I would be dead, and our children would be left at his mercy. There was no way I could subject them to living a life in fear like I had.

I used all my remaining strength to hoist myself up and open the drawer. The gun lay there, begging me to pick it up. His back

was turned to me now as he paced the room muttering under his breath, a stream of curses directed at me, at the kids, at life itself. He hadn't noticed the shift in power – how control could slip when you are blinded by anger and rage.

He turned, and our eyes locked.

For a split second, there was silence.

His lips curled into the sneer that preceded pain, but it was his eyes that betrayed him. For years they had been cold and calculated, brimming with the cool confidence of a man who thought he was untouchable. But now, I could see the panic, as they darted between me and the gun. He was scared.

This was no longer his game, and he knew it. The predator had become the prey, standing still in the middle of the room, stripped of all the power he thought he owned. His hand twitched, as if he wanted to reach for me, for the gun – anything to regain that control. He didn't move. He couldn't. I was in control this time. For the first time, he was the one standing small in the shadow of someone else.

'Sonya, put it down.'

The words felt like venom on my skin. I knew he saw the disgust in my face when he said my name.

He opened his mouth to speak again, but I didn't let him.

The gunshot silenced everything.

This time it was his turn to fall to the floor. The difference between us was that he would never get back up.

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'Sonya?' Julia shakes my shoulders. 'You spaced out.' She looks at me, her green eyes laden with a million questions. Her phone is in

her hand, and I get a glimpse of the screen before it locks shut. Texts with Pete. *How long was I spaced out for? What has she been texting him about?* ‘Pete was asking what to cook the kids for dinner. I told him he can’t go wrong with chicken nuggets.’

‘Thank you, again,’ I say.

‘What for?’

‘Looking after the kids, coming to help. I don’t know what I would do without you.’

I swear I could see a flicker of hesitation in Julia’s eyes. It is only natural; she is standing in front of a woman who has just killed her husband. I need her to know I have a valid reason. There is one easy way I could prove to her that it was justified. But is murder ever justified?

I lift up my top and watch as her face changes. Julia studies the bruises and the scars, gasping as she sees my bloodied flesh from wounds created from the fight. Her fingertips brush over the most tender areas of skin on my body. It should have been painful, even a slight touch usually causes my injuries to hurt, but her touch is comforting. For the first time in my life someone knows the secret I have been keeping

‘Sonya...’ Her voice breaks.

I place my hand on her cheek and give her a small smile.

‘At least you know why my favourite item of clothing is a turtleneck top.’ Even as I said it, the slight tremble in my voice betrays the pain I attempt to mask with humour.

Julia pulls me in for a hug, her arms wrapping around me, almost as if she can hold all my broken pieces together.

‘Why didn’t you tell me how bad it was?’

‘He threatened to hurt them.’ I don’t have to explain who he threatened; besides Julia, my children are the two most important people in my life.

Julia walks towards the couch and slumps down on it. I don't know how I would react if the situations were reversed, however, I would be a lot less composed than she is. Actually, I would be less composed, but that would never happen since Julia would never kill someone... unlike me.

'We should tell Pete.'

The words hang in the air between us, awaiting a response. I don't say anything.

'It was self-defence, Sonya. Your body is enough evidence to show that.'

She is right, I can prove that I have been abused. But I also know that I will be known as the woman who killed her husband. I know my kids would grow up without a father because I shot him in the head. I know that nothing in my life would be the same again.

A sharp ringing sound breaks the silence that had settled between us.

Julia's phone. She looks down at it in confusion as she reads the name of the caller. She mouths the word *Pete* to me, before pressing 'answer' on the screen.

Julia places her phone on speaker, calm despite the tension in the air.

'Everything okay, honey?' she leans back into the couch. 'What's up?'

'The kids are fine,' Pete sounds stressed, 'They're eating now, but I need to ask you something.' Julia glances at me, eyes flickering with worry. 'It's about Lucy,' Pete says. 'She mentioned something to me earlier – said her dad told her this morning that Sonya might be...going away for a while. Do you know anything about that?'

My breath catches and Julia's stiffens. *He knows*. He knew to-

day was the day he was going to get rid of me. He even told the kids, had started planting the seeds in their minds. Pete carries on speaking.

‘I know him and Sonya have had their struggles so I thought I would check in since you’re round there now.’

‘Yes, Sonya is fine, don’t worry. Just had a bit of a rough day. We’ll come back in an hour so she can pick up the kids. I’ll let her know about Lucy though.’

‘Okay, darling.’ Pete hesitates, as though he wants to say more, but settles for ‘I’ll see you later.’

‘This is exactly what we needed, Julia.’

Something that feels like relief courses through my veins, replacing the worry and the fear that had inhabited my body. All we have to do is go to Pete and tell him everything. He knows what my kids have told him, and he knows my husband and I hadn’t had the best of relationships. Everything was falling into place... or as well as it could for a murder case I supposed. Julia smiles up at me from the couch.

‘Let’s get this floor cleaned up a little or find a rug to put over that.’ She points towards the red stain on the carpet, which seems to be bigger than I remember, like an accusation, a reminder of what I did. After finding a rug to put over the stain, and putting a blanket over the body, we decide that it is time to face Pete. Leaving the house felt like a crime in itself knowing what was behind the door that we had just locked.

The world is quiet, the sun is setting, a faint breeze licks my skin. Julia walks with a casual stride, too composed, too calm. I think I would give anything to trade positions with her right now. As we reach her front door a feeling of nausea kicks in. Julia places her hand on my back and the feeling dissipates.

‘Everything is going to be okay, Sonya,’ she says.

I can’t help but notice she doesn’t quite meet my eyes when she speaks, still, I trust her. Stepping inside the house feels comforting. I can hear my children laughing together in the front room. The chicken nuggets must have been a hit. I smile to myself, their innocence a bittersweet reminder of how everything is about to change. Pete greets us in the hallway, a tea towel slung over his shoulder and his glasses falling far down his nose. His eyes meet mine, although the usual twinkle in them is nowhere to be seen.

‘We should leave the kids in the lounge for now,’ Pete says. ‘They’re watching TV and have a couple of toys out to entertain. Lucy ate all her food, and Jack, as usual, refused the peas.’ Nothing out of the ordinary there, Jack has always been the fussiest out of the two. As much as I want to give them both the biggest hug in the world, I nod at Pete and we walk into the kitchen.

It’s a simple kitchen, modern and clean. No dead body on the floor. Each of us pull up a chair, Pete on the far side, and Julia and I sit next to each other. Pete pours us each a cup of tea, from a pot that he had already had brewing.

‘I am assuming Julia told you what Lucy mentioned earlier?’ Pete says. You can tell he is a cop, his eyes give nothing away and his questions are asked so.

‘She did.’ My stomach tightens. Julia gives me the nod to continue. ‘It’s actually why we are here. There’s something I need to tell you.’

I tell him everything. Start to finish, all eleven years of it.

Pete doesn’t interrupt, his face is impassive, almost as if he’s heard it all before. I am sure Julia hasn’t told him, he must just hear it a lot in his line of work. I guess I had hoped for a little understanding in his expression, or even a little compassion. Perhaps, I

am deluding myself to expect even that. He listens. I show him my cuts, scars, and bruises. Something softens in his expression when he sees them, but he reverts back to the emotionless state he was in before. I feel uneasy so I take a sip of tea to distract myself. It's sweet.

'So, Sonya,' Pete says. 'You killed your husband?'

'Yes.'

'You shot him with a gun that you introduced into the scenario first?'

'Yes but—'

'You couldn't have been certain you were going to die then?'

My blood runs cold, and the room starts spinning. Pete's eyes harden and everything about the situation feels off. A nauseating feeling that Pete and Julia are not on my side starts to writhe through my stomach.

Pete holds up a recording device that has been hidden in his pocket, and presses play. No mentions of the abuse I endured, no mentions of anything other than the last three questions he asked me. Julia doesn't look at me, her gaze is steady and unwavering at the wall in front of her.

'Jules...' I whisper.

'I'm sorry, Sonya,' Pete says with a sickening smile. 'You know how much we have wanted kids. Lucy and Jack were never safe enough with you. You've just given us the opportunity of a lifetime.'

The weight of the room presses down on me, suffocating me with every breath I attempt to take. The kitchen, once a place of comfort, of shared drinks and laughter, feels sterile, foreign. Betrayal wraps itself around me like a noose, except it hurts more than my husband's hands ever did.



‘The police are already on their way.’ Pete looks at his watch. ‘Any minute now.’

I stand up but regret that choice as my legs start to wobble beneath me. As I take a step, the world tilts, the ground feels like it is sinking. My vision blurs but before it fades fully, I catch sight of Julia and Pete’s untouched cups of tea. I can’t even run. They had planned this so perfectly in such a short space of time, or maybe this has been their plan all along and they’ve been waiting for something like this to happen.

‘I’m sorry, Sonya.’ Julia’s voice drifts into my mind as everything begins to slip away.

Her words hit harder than any bullet could.

# Call Me Not Lord

Kain Stones

Kain Stones is a third year Creative Writing student at the University of Lincoln. Kain writes character-focused historical fiction, exploring themes of identity and status in changing civilisations. In his spare time, they enjoy developing his skills in digital artistry and photography.

Am I not generous? Have I not been kind? Who are they to come before a living god? Was it not I that shared with the people my opulence? From base to cornice I have adorned my halls with splendour and riches inconceivable to those I have been so benevolent to. I have turned places of politics into lavish dens of pleasure. I have given them all of this so that they may withal indulge in carnal pleasures of the flesh before the end of all things. It will come. I have seen it in the viscera and remains. They do not lie to me. Their sacrifices have foretold me the future. What about me though so sickens them, those who would see my rule end?

My people flock to my great halls and yet my own guards deride me. So little have I done to show them the potency of my force, yet I can tell from their eyes they're afraid of what they see. Trembling at my capable cruelty, possessed by my lasciviousness, they pry and salivate with lecherous whispers.

By day they look at me as though I am no one. By night they leer through linen curtains and embrace me on silk sheets. Our hands and lips lost to one another, yet none belonging to any that could ever quench my thirst for what eludes even myself. I amble through my hedonic palace of pleasures as one would saunter on hot sands, admiring my suitors arranged along the peristyles according to my urges.

Yet the flesh I walk in is not my own, not always. For all my wealth and grandeur cannot grant me what I long for most. Born with this flesh that does not suit me, it chokes me. It was not my choice to be born this way; it has been thrust upon me just as my title has been. I have begged up and down my empire for anyone that can free me from this prison. A prison that is my body, one I

do not recognise and do not care to. What good are all the riches of the world when I myself feel so poor? My senate do not understand; they treat it like the mad whims of a foolish Emperor. I am beset by enemies on all fronts. Cold words lash across my very being with forked tongues from bitter maws. Only gentle lips and delicate whispers do I find with each alone. Only in their hushed tones and passing glances do they acknowledge me only to forget me again.

They treat me as though I am not their Emperor, treating me like a common whore just as much when they cast me away as when they secretly beckon me alone. I took to the throne when I was just a child, taken from a land I had once called my home into this so-called bastion of civilisation. How delightfully devilish that in all the years this great and bountiful empire has ruled, none could have imagined what trouble I could cause with a mere Charioteer.

They do not consider my values as essential as the values of Rome. My ways are treated the same as those pagan blasphemies, something foreign and evil. They spit in the very face of the progress I have brought to them. As high priest I carried my faith with my own bare hands, paraded my own God in the streets atop the throne intended for me whilst I led the march on the streets amongst the plebeians. Forgive them God of the sun, Elagabal, they shun you all the while basking in the warmth of your glow. They mock my faith as though it were some barbarian cult, some druidic ritual. They know not what I want for my realm.

All oppose me, all but my faithful charioteer, my Hierocles. For the crown of luscious gold locks he wears, for his athleticism and affection, for this I call him Caesar for all Rome. To me, to us alone, I gladly call him "Husband". He in turn proudly proclaims

me his wife. They call me debauched, disgusting, depraved. If this is what they call my love, my most base desires, for that I fervidly denounce Concordia. They call me what they want, so as long as they do not call me Lord, for I am a Lady.

My Charioteer knows, the wise who flock up the Palatine to my Elagabalium know, an age of ruin and misery is upon us. Despite how many I bring to my Baetyl's altar, no matter how pure and beautiful my offerings are, the mourning felt by their loved ones is not enough to quell the terrible visions conjured in their entrails. So many children of Rome have died at my altar, a necessary sacrifice my people don't yet understand. All who are wise know that the advent of chaos is but a blink away and those who wish to enjoy what remaining life we have left are more than welcome to join me in my grandest bathhouse.

I want not hollow titles derived from meaningless bloodshed; my only whims regarding my entitling are that I be remembered as happy and pious. If only my praetorians felt the same, my legion to whom I give so much. For them and all others who would oppose me, I have requested a banquet of such grandeur, they will be hopeless to resist me.

They may drink my wine until they are maudlin. They may feast out of my pantries until they are so full they burst. They may even have my whores – to them they may do whatever they like. It matters little to me how they choose to enjoy themselves, only that they do so at my feet. All I ask is that they look up to me from the cushions they lay upon and recognise me as the glorious benefactor of this tremendous opulence.

My banquets have suffered a reputation of being full of mischief and misfortune, this is only partly true. I have a wonderful time; my guests, however – well, that very much depends on what

I have planned for them. I have seen my guests disembowelled, eaten and beaten for my own amusement; they expect it. What is required is something new, a spectacle only an Emperor could provide them. My men have scoured every corner of the world to fetch all manner of exotic flora. Violets, Roses by the millions, lying in waiting for my most ingenious jape of all.

As they indulge in their hedonistic abandon, gluttons to the cornucopias of pleasure I provide, I will watch, lain in golden silk. The petals will fall and one by one the hands that clasped once for flesh will claw desperately for escape. Their mouths once full of meat and wine will choke and beg for air. The flowers will accumulate, smothering all beneath them, turning salacious whispers into struggled gasps. They will be buried beneath the once soft and delicate flora, crushed under their weight. From there I will watch my spectacle, observing unwavering, enraptured.

# One Last Adventure, Eh?

Ash Unsworth

Ash Unsworth is a genderqueer person from Nottingham. Published in an LGBT youth memoir anthology at 16, Ash went on to further study journalism and eventually Creative Writing (BA) at Lincoln. Ash is mostly interested in writing queer fantasy. When not writing, they can be found rolling dice in D&D.

Tuval sat on the cliff's edge which overlooked the city. A grey sky hung overhead; small patches of dappled sunlight pushed through the clouds. He rested his hands over the sea of green nestled beneath him. With a squint, he looked up at the trees overhead. A silvery stream trailed down his cheeks. The snap of a twig echoed throughout the overlook and Tuval twisted. He unsheathed his daggers then slid them back as his face lit up.

'Hello, Tuval,' a sweet voice drifted out of the foliage. The slender frame of Kallax shoved his way through the thicket. The branches gripped his sleeve and tore the seam. He smoothed his hand over the tear, recited an Elven incantation and a soft blue glow pulled the fabric together as strands of webbing criss-crossed their way over the damage. With a wave, the webbing pulled the seam together with an artisan's touch.

Kallax ran towards Tuval. The roguish human climbed to his feet and matched Kallax's pace, he held out his arms and waited for the embrace with a smile. Kallax dove forward with the grace of a panther and tackled Tuval to the ground. The pair rolled through the grass.

'Oof! Did you forget you're not in Beastshape?' Tuval coughed between words, he pulled himself out from underneath Kallax and climbed back up; his mouth exploded with laughter. He brushed his hair before he rested his hand on Kallax's shoulder. The pair rushed into each other's arms and tightened their hold in a tender moment.

'I have missed you, Kallax.'

'I missed you too.' Kallax turned to look over the cliff edge and focused on the city beneath. 'It's been a while since we've been here.'



‘When we were both just bairns.’

Kallax cradled Tuval’s hand and led him towards the forest edge.

‘At this spot. I burst out the forest, and there you were.’ Kallax squeezed Tuval’s hand, and his fingertips glided over the scars.

‘I wonder how it is,’ Kallax asked.

‘How what is?’ replied Tuval. He pushed the bush aside and peered down the beaten path.

‘My home, before the bandits—’ A weight hung low down his face. Lips curled downwards and a quiver shook them.

‘Hey! Happy thoughts!’ cheered Tuval. ‘If we found a home for those lost animals, we can find you a new one. Or rebuild the old one! It’s not lost forever.’

Tuval pushed through the bush and started hacking at twigs with his sword. Leaves danced in the air and stray bits of bark arced like arrowheads before they settled into the dirt. He knelt to start gathering the wood.

‘What are you doing?’ Kallax’s eyebrow raised, and he crossed his arms.

‘You’ll see,’ grunted Tuval. He opened his backpack and pulled out some twine. Kallax’s eyes glowed and he wiggled his fingers at the ground. A green light flashed, and a tiny wooden humanoid popped into its place. With hands outstretched, the wooden creature danced in place as if pulled by aethereal string.

‘Okay, it’s ready!’ called Tuval as he vaulted over the pruned remains of the bush. His face beamed, his hands on display. ‘Tada!’ Whimsy danced in his voice. A crude, mini hut rested in Tuval’s hand. Bits of twigs were tied together at the base and roof.

‘So here is a window,’ pointed Tuval. ‘Here is a chimney.’ He flicked a little twig stack. ‘And here is a door. Look, it even opens!’

Tuval poked the door open and closed with careful flicks and nudges. He recoiled his finger after a bit more playing.

‘Ow!’ A sharp cry. He looked down at the little splinter embedded in his finger. He flinched, and the little hut tumbled to the floor and crumbled into a pile of sticks.

Kallax watched in slow motion as the little hut crumpled to the floor. The glow in his eyes blinked out and the dancing wood puppet swayed and fell to one side. He dashed to Tuval’s side and held his hand and looked at the afflicted finger. Kallax whispered some Elvish words, and a soft glow flowed through their fingers. The splinter wobbled, with a slight snap it popped out and bounced off the floor. The puncture wound knitted together, and the red swell softened.

Kallax looked at the mini hut; his face creased, his vision blurred, and tears flooded from his eyes. ‘You don’t have to help me with this.’

Tuval moved in and held Kallax’s hair away from his face. ‘I want to. You deserve this.’ Tuval touched Kallax’s chin and lifted his head up until they were at eye level. Tuval traced his thumbs across Kallax’s cheeks and wiped away the tears.

‘What if they’re still there?’ said Kallax through choked sobs. He craned his neck and looked up into the sky. A group of Kingfishers soared high above, before they were silhouetted in the sun’s light.

‘Then we will take care of them. And after you could call our forest friends! They’ll be glad to see us well.’ A little smile cracked across his face, and he took deep breaths.

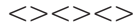
‘I bet they’ve grown up.’

‘Now let’s go!’ cheered Tuval. He turned to jog into the forest. He failed to see the tree root which upended the floor, and his foot

kicked against it. He flew a few paces and toppled over; his limbs splayed.

‘Are you alright!?’ Kallax cried. Tuval picked himself up and slipped on the curves of the roots.

‘I’m grand! Now let’s go!’ Tuval grabbed Kallax’s hand and off they ran through the forest.



Kallax and Tuval pushed through into the clearing. Amber could be seen through the breaks in the boughs as evening took shape. A majestic oak tree adorned the far end as it pierced the heavens above. A tangled mess of wooden arms entwined overhead, almost like a web.

‘I haven’t been here since...’ Kallax rested Tuval’s hand in his palm and caressed it.

‘I remember this tree. I put you in a tight spot.’ Tuval turned back to look at Kallax and waved his hand in a downwards arc.

‘Yeah, when you nearly got me caught. But then you swooped in like a guardian spirit.’

‘Swinging like a hero,’ Tuval emphasised the correction.

‘Yes. Swinging like a hero,’ echoed Kallax with a roll of his eyes. ‘It does make up for robbing me of my food. You did repent in the eyes of the Oakfather.’ Kallax crossed his arms. Tuval stared while trying to suppress a laugh.

‘Admit it. You thought I was cool,’ giggled Tuval.

Kallax shook his head and looked away, he walked to the treeline and listened to the nearby brook somewhere behind the wall of bark. He turned back around then darted his eyes up and down the oak.

‘Where in the Hells did you go?’

Tuval stood atop the thick branches of the oak. He peered out through a slight gap in the leaves and spied on Kallax who paced back and forth.

‘This isn’t funny.’ Kallax’s voice bounced all around, like they were in a natural echo chamber. Tuval gripped a vine in his hands and bent his knees. He tensed his back and planted his feet into the tree bark. He shuffled to the side and maintained his gaze on Kallax’s position. He moved back towards the trunk and pushed his foot into the tree, kicking himself off and into a sprint. The branch began to thin, and he leapt to the side and bent his legs as the swing propelled him towards the Elf beneath.

Tuval’s hair whipped in the wind. Leaves zipped by in a haze. Tuval reached out his arm. He wobbled on the vine, shot his arm back and steadied himself before he reached out to Kallax again. Kallax clocked on to where Tuval was hiding, his eyes widened, and a gentle scream forced itself into a roar. He yelped as the roguish blur snapped him off his feet. The pair coursed through the air, exploding through the canopy above.

Tuval planted his feet onto the thick branch and let Kallax dangle before putting him down. Kallax ran to the trunk and leaned against it. Sucking in great bouts of air before he slid down to his knees. Tuval lifted one arm into the air, and he extended the other towards Kallax.

‘May I have this dance?’ A chirp danced off his tongue. He took one step forward and kept his heel raised. Kallax didn’t say a word. His head turned towards the horizon where he examined a pillar of smoke which rose high up above the treeline. Tuval knelt next to him and turned to follow the gaze.

‘I need to go back,’ a half whisper. He squeezed Tuval’s hand

before he pushed it away. Kallax pushed himself against the trunk with his arms pressed against his sides and raised himself up before he leaned against Tuval's arms. 'Please take me down. We can have that dance later.'

Tuval slid down the tree trunk with a cat-like grace. Kallax clung to his back and rolled to the ground, Tuval wiped his hands across his sleeve. A trail of bark and moss nestled into the fibres. He sighed and shook his head.

'Are you sure you're ready for this?' Kallax furrowed his brows.

Tuval nodded and twisted his neck to look at his partner. 'I'm coming with you.' Tuval pursed his lips.

Kallax said nothing. He grabbed Tuval's hand and led him back into the treeline. The wispy tower of smoke hid behind the trees. 'It feels strange. Coming back here.' Kallax's voice cracked. They had walked for what felt like hours, the streams of sunlight that broke through the leaves were now amber. 'My Grove, Tuval. They were slaughtered that day.' His voice trembled. Tuval pulled him into his arms and ran his fingers through the golden hair. He leaned in close to Kallax's ear.

'We can turn back. You don't have to do this,' he whispered. He leaned back and used his thumb to wipe the tear from Kallax's cheek.

'Thank you,' Kallax mouthed. He took a sharp inhale, then closed his eyes and clenched his fists. He took a hesitant turn and struggled to take his eyes from Tuval and look at the threshold behind.

'This is it.' Kallax traced his fingers along the tree trunk, up to the point where a second tree intertwined and formed a natural gate. Several days had passed, evidenced by the grime on their tunics. A lone flower bud adorned the twisted formation. He turned back to look at Tuval.

‘I need to do this alone.’

Tuval locked eyes with Kallax before his gaze wandered past the gate and down the shaded path beyond. He reached out with an outstretched palm, then returned it to his side and nodded.

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Kallax passed through the gate. His eyes widened; a void formed in the pit of his stomach. His hand shot up and clasped itself around his mouth.

He looked on at the ruins. Images flashed in his mind. The red-hot embers, the cries for help. A child too afraid to do anything. The waves of an inferno consuming all with a great shadow rushing closer towards him. He grabbed his hair and shook himself. Kallax breathed and shook his head to force the images out of his mind.

A little wisp of smoke danced a distance away, with a gentle glow. Bedrolls lied strewn around a bonfire. A groan echoed out of one of the nearby houses. With his back arched in anticipation, he walked with a slow measured pace towards the building.

‘They can’t be...’ Skulls hung from doorways, a few weapon racks dotted the area, blades nestled within their frames. A door creaked and a large man lumbered out into the open. The bulky frame of the person yawned and locked eyes with Kallax. He sputtered and grabbed the haft of an axe which leaned against the wall.

‘Intruder!’ the man roared. A flood of activity filled the air, with sounds of men unsheathing their swords and heavy footsteps. Kallax turned to look in all directions. He whipped out his sword and pointed the tip at the imposing figure. His jaw dropped, then tightened. He flared his nostrils, held his sword in both hands and planted his feet in the ground.

‘It’s you!’ Bits of spittle flew out of his mouth, and he bared his teeth. ‘You’re the knave who took my Grove from me.’

‘Ah. I remember you. You’re the escapee.’

‘This Grove is not yours. By the gods above, I will reclaim it from you.’ Kallax lowered the tip of his blade and bent his arms.

‘This land is our home now, boy.’ The large man leveraged his axe towards Kallax. ‘It belongs to us now, and on your dying breath you will know the name Uthgar.’ He cackled and rested his axe upon the ground, balancing upon the shaft. A round of callous laughs moved throughout the bandit ranks.

Kallax remained silent. A faint amber crackled, and a glow hummed within his blade. One of the bandits stepped forwards, sword raised. Kallax spun his sword, an arc of flame erupted from the tip and formed a cone which engulfed the aggressor.

The other bandits looked with wide eyes before their faces narrowed. A few dashed forward, bellowing vengeful screams. Kallax slashed at one, his blade cut through another. White hot sparks shot out of his fingertips, and he punched out at the nearest bandit. A bright flash of blue arched from the bandit’s body and linked several together. The bandit chain crumpled to the floor with a splash of sparks.

The other bandits took a step back and gripped their weapons with both hands. Uthgar snarled and roared. All eyes turned to him, his face burned red, and his eyes were a bright orange. He crouched and propelled himself forward, careening through the air like a ball out of a cannon, axe high. Kallax bent down and leapt backwards, his sword raised in both hands. Tendrils of lightning snaked across his blade; he pulled the sword back. When Uthgar got within range, Kallax plunged the blade into his chest.

Lightning illuminated him from within, followed by blue

wisps which pushed out of his back. Uthgar screamed and sparks erupted from his mouth. He balled up a shaky fist and rammed it into Kallax's abdomen; Kallax heaved.

He felt numbness overpower him, and his sword arm faltered. He flew through the air and slammed into the remnants of a wooden house. The wall cracked and Kallax slumped to the floor in a bloodied mess.

'Kallax!' a voice called out. Tuval burst through the bushes, daggers drawn. He zoomed within range of Uthgar and threw out his hand, gripping the hilt of Kallax's sword buried within the bandit's chest. Uthgar slammed his palm into Tuval's face and squeezed. With a whirl, Tuval was slammed into the bloodied dirt. Uthgar gripped his axe in both hands and raised it up high. He tilted it backwards, bent his knees and his muscles bulged. Kallax strained to look, he threw his hands forward and aimed above Uthgar's head.

'No!' he cried. His voice echoed in all directions, storm clouds swirled together and flashed. Kallax slapped the ground, and a colossal lightning bolt pushed down into Uthgar just as the axe crunched into Tuval's torso. Uthgar collapsed with a groan, blood coated his face and chest. His feet were redder than his war paint.

A stifled choke marked his final breath. The surviving bandits looked on. Murmurs floated throughout their number. Kallax stumbled over to Tuval and placed one hand on his chest. He fixed his intense gaze on the remaining bandits. He flexed his fingers and buried them beneath the softened dirt.

'You want some too? You saw how your leader fell!' The bandits took a few careful steps forward. Their arms trembled; their swords shook. Their footing wavered but the fury in their eyes remained. Then, several pairs of knees stabilised. Loose dirt flicked



into the air as the bandits dashed forward, swords swung side to side, seeing weakened prey on the floor. Kallax closed his eyes and straightened his face. His fingers glowed a soft olive hue.

The ground cracked and vines shot out like a tsunami. The bandits tripped as the ropey plants tangled around their feet. They hacked to free themselves until their arms were entangled by the tendrils. The bandits screamed for mercy as their bodies sank beneath the ground. The vines wrapped around their throats and their screams were cut short beneath the dirt. The vines returned to the earth. Naught remained of the men who once stood a second ago.

Kallax looked over Tuval's body; a deep ravine split it near in two. He chanted an incantation, and a blue glow pooled out of his fingers and spread across Tuval's chest. His eyes snapped open. He coughed, then strained to sit up, but he fell back. The rush of blood did not recede. Kallax repeated the spell. Tuval pushed with his palms on the ground and balanced himself on his elbow.

'You were brilliant.' Tears built up within Tuval's brown eyes before his head snapped forward and blood sprayed from his mouth.

'We need to get you healed,' Kallax panicked as he fumbled to adjust himself. He darted his eyes across the size of the gaping wound. Tuval's elbow shook, and he fell flat on the ground. Human skin became pallid, Kallax unfurled a roll of bandages and set to work. He rolled Tuval over with care, with every layer that was applied. Soon the bandages had a pool of deep red which grew in the centre.

'I never should have let you come here with me. This wouldn't have happened.' Kallax brushed his fingers over the bandages and checked for any gaps. 'You would be fine. You wouldn't be in danger. You wouldn't be in this mess.'

Tuval held his finger against Kallax's lips. 'I told you I would get you home,' Tuval giggled between coughs.

'This isn't funny, Tuval! You said we'd do this together.' Kallax pulled on the bandages, before he tied them in a knot. He rested his hands on Tuval and repeated the incantation. Blue light glowed throughout Tuval's body, yet his skin did not darken.

Kallax hooked Tuval's arm around his shoulder and craned him off the ground. Kallax inhaled sharply and his colour faded as his eyes looked down into the deep red puddle which now occupied Tuval's spot.

'How bad is it?' wheezed Tuval.

'You're going to be just fine,' Kallax choked, his lips quivering.

With a slow pace, Kallax helped Tuval over to a building with the roof intact. Kallax pushed his weight against the door. The hinges cried before they snapped, and the door fell to the side with a crack. The pair wobbled inside, Kallax lowered Tuval onto a bed.

'I knew you were ready for this. To come home.' Tuval smiled. Kallax clenched his jaw and scrunched up his eyes.

'I can't help you,' Kallax whispered.

Tuval's smile faded, then snapped back, yet it did not reach his eyes.

'You've lost too much blood. My magic won't fix this.'

'I got what I wanted,' Tuval half-said. 'I brought you home. Like I said I would.'

'Did you find your own?' Kallax said, as silver tears trickled down his cheeks.

'I did. It was wherever you were.' Tuval grimaced.

Kallax winced and placed his hands on Tuval's torso. He screamed the healing words, but the same soft blue glow drifted through Tuval. He screamed again, and again, and again. Tuval's

face was now so pale, he might as well have been a ghost.

‘It’s ok. I’m not afraid. You have a chance to rebuild your home. You should take it.’

‘You promised to build it with me!’ Kallax cried between clenched teeth. He slammed the wall next to him and slid to the floor.

Tuval inhaled and groaned as he twisted to the side.

Kallax climbed to his feet with shaky legs and grabbed Tuval’s hand, cupping it in his.

‘Tell me. Did you ever find your parents again?’ Kallax asked.

‘Yes. They adopted another kid. I figured they didn’t want to know me. So, I wrote to you.’

Kallax failed to keep the flood at bay from within his eyes. The tattered remains of the bed sheets were turning a deep black.

‘And I missed you. I wanted to see my kindred spirit once more.’

‘And now you’re saying goodbye to me!’ Kallax snapped.

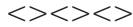
‘Now that’s not fair,’ said Tuval. His breath was shallow. ‘You will see me again. And when you do—’ Tuval choked. Kallax gripped Tuval’s hand tighter. His fist was cold. A silence hung in the air.

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The human’s hand went limp. Kallax laid Tuval’s hand on the bed and held it for what felt like an eternity. Kallax scrunched up his face and crossed Tuval’s arms across his chest. He stood up and limped outside, Kallax leaned against the wall and allowed himself to slide down to the ground. He pulled his knees up against his chest and he looked over the village remains, through the cloudy haze of his tears. He dragged his sleeve over his eyes and blinked.

The village came into focus. The campfire had died out. The huge body of Uthgar still littered the floor.

'I will show him a home to be proud of.' He clambered back to his feet and hobbled back to Tuval's side. With a heave, the still warm body hung in his arms and Tuval was transported to the forest edge.



Kallax stood up. He laid the final stone in a ring surrounding a makeshift headstone. He traced his fingers around the rim of the stone circle and an array of flowers sprouted from the ground and bloomed in a sea of rainbow. Kallax picked up Tuval's weapons. He felt the weight in his hands and a droplet splashed onto the sheaths. He knelt and balanced them against the headstone, blade down, and stood back up.

'Oakfather. Bless this lost soul and accept his spirit into your embrace,' he prayed. The flowers shook and danced towards him. Kallax allowed himself to form a smile.

He walked through the gate back into the forest. He stretched his arms out to his side and gripped the air. A mighty shake and the sound of loose debris hit the floor. A wall of branches crawled out from around the forest. He strained and pulled his arms back to his side and the branches circled around each other.

The lone flower bud overhead sprouted small petals. A blue hue amongst the mossy green bark. The newborn petals pointed down at Kallax and closed themselves up before reopening and standing proud. He nodded at the fledgling flower and walked back towards the village. The light from the forest turned to darkness as the branch wall tightened and sealed him off from the world beyond.

# The Ayakashi Legacy

Bailey Kidd

Bailey Kidd is a new prose writer based in Lincoln, where he attends University as a BA Creative Writing student. Also based in Doncaster, his work mostly consists of fictional women's wrestling, blurring the lines between kayfabe and reality. When not writing about wrestling, Bailey enjoys... watching wrestling.

*OWNERSHIP AND CREATION OF THESE CHARACTERS BELONG  
TO AVARICE*

## NEARING THE END

17TH SEPTEMBER 2021

Twenty minutes had passed. Twenty minutes of constant punishment inflicted on Cecelia. Twenty minutes since the two sisters stared into each other's eyes, waiting for the bell to ring. Cecelia's eyes were flooded with regret and exhaustion, while Lilian's held rage and irritation.

Lilian had made her way around the ring with her hands around her waist, mimicking a championship title that she believed would soon be there. She had pushed her way through the Iron Woman tournament, beating the very best Japan had to offer, but nobody could match up to the Black Dahlia herself. Except for the nagging puppy who chewed at Lilian's ankles, reminding herself of who she was at her weakest. A sister.

Cecelia had managed to make it to the final as the ultimate underdog, however Lilian knew it was nothing but luck. As she walked around the steel stairs, a loud cry of hisses erupted through the venue. She glanced over at Cecelia and for a split second felt almost apologetic for what she had put her baby sister through. Yet as quick as she felt that guilt, it was washed away, and her cold aura returned once more.

Cecelia remained laying on the floor with one hand clutching her ribs and the other trying to push herself up. A subtle smirk formed across Lilian's face as she flicked a part of her fringe out of her eye. She ripped her knee pad and sprinted around the ring in the direction of Cecelia. Lilian delivered a sharp knee, which

struck against the side of Cecelia's face, planting her in the same spot she previously lay in. Lilian kneeled next to her and pulled Cecelia's head off the ground. The black braid gripped tightly in Lilian's clutch as soft winces escaped an almost lifeless Cecelia.

'It didn't have to come to this, Cece. Or is it Sakura 2.0 now?'

She looked around the sold-out arena. The strong red lights shone across the rows and rows of fans in attendance. The billboards demonstrated portraits of the matches on the card. The title 'Sister vs. Sister' screamed out to Lilian, who fought to acknowledge that the competitor she was brutalising was her baby sister. The girl who she had spent most of her life protecting and supporting was now her enemy. The girl who she watched deteriorate after the loss of their mother was someone she was now brutalising. Lilian released her right hand and pointed towards the entrance. Cecelia dropped lower from the release. Lilian smirked at the look of her sister.

She glanced towards the ramp, acknowledging her mentor, Nishioka, who had begun to make her way towards them wearing her signature black robe. In one hand, she gripped the infamous kendo stick that was too familiar to Cecelia and the fans. The weeks of beatings at the hands of the Black Dahlia left several bruises and marks, some still present on Cecelia's skin.

In the other hand was a dog collar. The chain was rusted silver, while the leather collar itself wore a decaying brown.

Lilian glared at Cecelia, who remained on the floor, clutching the right side of her forehead. Pressing on the sides of her face and dragging her upwards, she threw Cecelia back into the ring. Lilian followed her as any hunter would its prey. As she stepped towards her sister, Lilian scowled towards the bright pink tiger mask that sat beneath the bottom turnbuckle. It was an awful reminder

of the legacy that she believed to hold her back. The reminder to the world that Lilian was nothing more than a legacy superstar, trapped in the shadow of a legend, left to claw her way to the tiniest crumbs of stardom.

‘I don’t think this is going to end soon. Nishioka has a dog collar in her hand,’ said H.D. into the microphone.

‘Look at how Lilian is staring down that mask and Cecelia herself. We expected a war in this championship tournament final, especially between two sisters, H.D. but I don’t think a dog collar was on anyone’s bingo card,’ responded an energetic Tony Maxwell, who watched deep into the monitor sitting on the table.

Walking up to the tiger mask, Lilian picked it up. She scanned its features, the white outline around the eyes. Memories of wearing the oversized mask as a little girl flooded her mind. Her fingers ran across the pink fur at the bottom. Her eyes began to gloss over as tears threatened to release. She gripped the mask with both hands and began stretching the fabric. Lilian grunted and groaned as the material tore. The mask had been destroyed. With a final act of frustration, she threw the mask with such force that it hit a cameraman by the entrance ramp. Lilian’s breathing was erratic, her chest rose and fell with speed. She released a small whisper. ‘I’m sorry.’

As Nishioka stepped into the ring, Lilian snapped out of her trance and turned Cecelia over and onto her back, striking her repeatedly in the face with vicious elbows, one after another. Lilian grew more aggressive with each hit, applying more force and malice behind them. Blood began to pour, and the bright lights that shone from above started to become hazy to Cecelia as her eyes fluttered, fighting the urge to give in. Lilian didn’t care about her fading in and out of consciousness. Screaming after each blow, she



had unlocked a different type of rage, one that never seemed to end. There was no sign of tiredness or exhaustion, nor any intention of stopping.

Lilian was done playing with her food and planned to end Cecelia once and for all, like a dangerous jungle cat to a snake.

Eventually, Nishioka placed a hand on Lilian's shoulder, pausing the onslaught. She held out the dog collar as Lilian snapped her arm away out of habit. Standing up, she made her way to the ropes, leaned her head against them and exhaled. Nishioka made her way to Lilian, who turned to face her. She stretched her arm outwards, holding the dog collar as the kendo stick rested under her armpit. While staring at the leather in front of her, Lilian did not notice Cecelia crawling towards the ropes in hopes of escaping. A trail of blood followed her struggle, staining the white canvas. A permanent reminder of the ferocity that was witnessed that night. Turning her head to Cecelia, Lilian sighed, whispering the words that Nishioka had told her before the match.

*This only ends one way: we make her let go. Of her life or her mother, that decision is up to her.*

As Cecelia made it to the corner, she rested her head on the lower turnbuckle pad. Blood continued to drip onto the canvas. Lilian stalked towards her with a twisted madness reflected through her demonic stare. There wasn't a fan in attendance who wasn't in uncomfortable awe. On the left side barricade of the ring, several children hid in their parent's arms as they themselves watched on in horror. Standing above a broken Cecelia, Lilian reached out to meet Nishioka's hands for the dog collar. As she grasped the cold steel, several chain-links crashed against the mat. Turning to Cecelia, she watched as blood poured from her forehead, and a bruise was forming on the right side of her face.

Latching onto her braid, Cecelia winced with the little life she had left. Slipping the dog collar onto her neck, Lilian dragged Cecelia upwards by her hair, sending her through the middle rope with her body slumped in front of the announcer table. Commentators H.D. and Jenkins jumped back in fright, not wanting to be so close to the action. The crowd gasped in fear for the broken warrior.

‘You’re about to learn what it’s like to be second best,’ whispered Lilian.

Lilian pulled. Cecelia, in an instant, attempted to claw at Lilian’s grasp and the tight collar around her neck. The chain dragged against the middle rope as Cecelia lifted further from the ground. Cecelia’s legs shook with panic as her eyes began to roll to the back of her head. Chokes and saliva escaped from her mouth. The crowd was too distraught to react. This had become more than just about a championship and a legacy.

Lilian wanted to kill Cecelia.

However, as Cecelia’s attempts to fight dwindled, Lilian started to let go. A glimpse of concern and remorse flashed across her face. She dropped the chain onto the mat and stared at the canvas. Nishioka rushed towards her and placed the chain back in her hand.

‘You cannot show weakness. She is a plague on your career. Do you want to be seen as weak?’ Nishioka manipulated.

Lilian shook her head. The soft eyes that held regret switched back to the cold and menacing glare. She again pulled the chain as Cecelia lifted off the ground, tears filling her eyes as she did. The crowd booed and screamed in desperation.

‘Stop this!’

‘You’re evil!’

‘You should be the one to suffer.’

General Manager Rosalyn Lee rushed out through the entryway, fear plastered across her face. Her flat pumps caused a stumbled run as she desperately joined Cecelia at ringside. She began to lift her upwards, which made Cecelia release a large gasp of air.

Lilian dropped the chain, and Cecelia fell into Rosalyn's arms. Lilian climbed out of the ring. Turning to the Black Dahlia, Rosalyn placed Cecelia on her side as she stood back up and stared Lilian down.

With a lack of hesitation, Lilian snapped her hand across Rosalyn's face, causing her to stumble backwards and land on the floor. She sat in shock. Before she rose to her feet, Lilian stretched outwards and pushed her knee into the side of the general manager. Rosalyn groaned as she fought to catch her breath. She remained laying on the floor, winded.

'I told you to stay out of my way,' shouted Lilian.

The crowd erupted further in disgust and hatred for Lilian, who smirked in return. Soaking all the hatred in as if it fuelled her. Yet, as she celebrated her despicable actions, a familiar song played throughout the arena.

Coming from the entrance ramp stood Susumi, who held an expression of pure anger and darkness in her eyes. Lilian, both out of shock to see her older sister and annoyed at another reminder of her past self, dived under the bottom rope and back into the ring. As Susumi slid into the ring, she and Lilian collided, throwing blow after blow.

Experience gained the advantage when Susumi took Lilian down, throwing harsh strikes at her younger sister. The crowd cheered at the sound of bamboo ricocheting throughout the arena.

Susumi screamed in pain as she rose up and rolled over onto her side. Nishioka stood above her with the infamous kendo stick in

hand. With bone-chilling calmness, she repeated the strikes, breaking the kendo stick against the back of Susumi, who remained laid out on the canvas. Pieces of bamboo flung out as some remained scattered next to a wounded Susumi.

Lilian rose and stomped on Susumi's stomach. Turning her back to Susumi, she left the ring. She made her way around the outer ring at a steady pace. Seeing Rosalyn making her way to her feet, Lilian pushed her into the barricade, landing shoulder first.

Nishioka laughed, witnessing her creation. Through weeks of mental manipulation, she had successfully created a weapon that she hoped would personally disgust Sakura from beyond the grave, and Lilian was unaware.

Lilian picked up Cecelia, who couldn't help but lean against her sister, too tired to stand on her own. Pushing the hair from her face, Lilian kissed Cecelia's bloody forehead. Her black lips now decorated by a dark shine of red, which dripped down her chin, enhancing the horrifying look of the Black Dahlia.

With her right hand pressed against Cecelia's face, she leaned in close to her ear. 'I'm doing this for you. You aren't made for this life. But that's okay. I absolve you of all your sinful choices.'

With a violent Irish Whip, Cecelia was sent flying headfirst into the barricade. The padded blockade, which separated the fans and the fighters, had found a new purpose. A loud thud was heard on impact as Cecelia fell lifelessly to the ground, unresponsive. The crowd winced. Silence followed.

Several medics rushed around the ring to Cecelia, checking her over, and after several moments of muted fear in the arena, they called for a stretcher. Placing a neck guard around her, they lifted her onto the board and began to wheel her out of the arena.

Rising to her feet, a hurt Rosalyn Lee and Susumi followed behind her. Lilian stood back in exhaustion. Susumi glanced back at Lilian, a look that told the story of unfinished business.

Lilian dragged her feet to the podium next to the announcers table and lifted the championship title from the velvet stand. Lilian was tired. While she raised the championship into the air, the crowd screamed in hatred. Some cried. Some attempted to climb over the barricade in hopes of getting their hands on the despicable villain. As Nishioka stood in the ring wearing a menacing smirk, Lilian closed her eyes and took a deep breath. She had escaped the clutches of a family that didn't respect her and gained a chance to create a career of her own. But she couldn't smile, no matter how much she wanted to.

'I'm sorry, but I deserve this,' mumbled Lillian, pulling the championship title to her chest.

# Our Iris

Macy Evardson

Macy Evardson is a writer from Lincoln who focuses on speculative fiction aimed at children and young adults. She is currently studying a BA in Creative Writing at the University of Lincoln. When she is not writing she is busy beside her cats playing cosy video games while everyone sleeps.

Dear Edith,

I have been at home for a week now. The train ride home was daunting and lonely. I suppose I should have spent more time with the other evacuees while we were away. I know I should have been happy. And I was. I have not seen my mum since I left her at the train station. She used to be so sad, but she has been smiling more now that I am back. But that does not mean I am not sad to be leaving you. This time we spent together has been the best. You changed me.

Being home is different. I do not know many people here. I only left the house once, on Tuesday. I had to buy more paper so that I could write to you. There were some children near my house. They were playing in the rubble. It looked fun. Mum said I could play with them tomorrow if I want to. She never would have suggested I do anything so messy before. I am not very excited but at least it is something to get me out of the house. I miss the country.

I miss you so much, Eddie.

Love from, Iris.

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‘You are late again, Edith.’ The door slams shut behind her, the wind chimes above collide with the wall and make a horrendous clinking noise. She slips her shoes off, muddy water soaking into the welcome mat.

‘Sorry, Mother.’

She is looking out of the window, stirring a mug of tea. The radio is on again. It is never off. The house is filled with names,

lists of the missing or dead. Her head turns to face Edith, looking straight at her clothes.

‘Well?’ Her voice is croaky. ‘Where was it this time?’

‘I was down by the lake,’ Edith speaks, failing to hide the nerves in her voice.

‘That explains why you have decided we need an indoor pond,’ she says with a disapproving tone. Her voice still does not muster up enough energy to rattle the truth out of Edith as she usually does.

‘Pardon?’ Edith looks down at her body. The water from her dress drips down, creating a puddle around her feet. ‘Oh... sorry, Mother.’

She steps back onto the soggy mat. Her frilly socks cling to her feet as she pulls them off. She looks at her reflection in the long window beside the door. There is a neat line just below her armpits separating her dry shoulders from the rest of her soaking wet body. The tips of her hair are a darker brown where they were dipped in the river water.

‘What were you doing out there in this weather, and with nothing on you? You kids do not feel the cold,’ her mother tuts.

Edith took her new woollen cardigan with her, but it got so wet that it weighed her down. She had to sneak around the back of the house to put it out over the washing line before her mother saw it. If her mother finds out how quickly Edith ruined it, she will give her a death worse than the soldiers got.

‘Sit down. Do not worry about the water, I will clean it later.’ Unusually unbothered, she leaves the room as Edith tiptoes over to a kitchen chair. When her mother returns, she passes over a blanket. ‘Get your pinny off and put that around you. I will fetch you a nice warm cuppa.’



‘I saw some pretty flowers on my way home. I thought they would look nice in the kitchen, so I went to pick them...’ She genuinely did see the flowers just the other day. They were pretty but far too close to the water to bother picking. She did not go to pick them, that was a lie. Instead, she was near the wishing well in the local woods, scrounging for pennies. Any loose change was gratefully taken and saved up. ‘...but I fell in.’

A mug of tea slides along the table as her mother shakes her head. ‘Blow it gently.’ She pulls the chair out and sits down, readjusting the skirt of her dress. ‘What were they?’

Edith glances up from the tea to look at her, waving the steam out of her face. ‘Hm?’

A small smile makes its way to her mother’s lips. Her skin is so pale it looks see through. The only colours on her are the brown freckles that match her hair. ‘The flowers?’

‘White lilies, I believe, although they were not bloomed entirely.’

‘A lovely flower, very romantic.’

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Dear Iris,

I hope you are having more fun now than when you wrote your latest letter. If you recall I did attempt to persuade you to spend more time with the other children. I cannot imagine how difficult this change must be. I miss you greatly but do not let our relationship get in the way of your life back home.

Your mum sounds nice. I can only be honest when I tell you that I am jealous. Mother has been distant. I do not know how long she has been like this. Perhaps I too had been distracted from life these past few years.

I am writing this letter under the starlight. The London sky must be so different. I should bring my paper and paints when I come to visit you.

I almost got caught today. I was down by the wishing well when I had an excellent idea. I scraped the bottom of the well, and I surely have enough money to purchase a train ticket.

Love from, Edith.

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The next day Edith wanders down to the river that flows behind Mrs Cooper's grocery shop. The river runs parallel to the train tracks. She lies face down on the wide banks and stretches out, reaching for flowers. She picks a handful for her mother, two for her grandparents, and an extra one for Iris. Along her walk back, she finds many more flowers, pink and purple ones, but mostly red.

When she arrives home with the flowers safely hidden in her bag, she sees her mother coming out of the door.

'Hello, Edith, I am off to the shops. Please put the kettle on when you see me coming back down the road.' She buttons up her coat and hangs her old umbrella over the crook of her arm like a handbag.

'Of course, Mother.'

As she leaves, Edith shuts the door behind her and enters the living area, where her grandpa is sitting and starting another cigarette. The ashtray on the arm of his chair is piled high like a volcano. Smoke rises from the butt and fills the room.

'Shh, do not tell your mother or I will be the one living in the garden. Now, where was I?' He crosses his legs and makes the grumbling noise he always makes when his body is aching. 'Ahh

yes. So, me, Andrew, and Simon went down to the station, ‘course what we did not know is that trains do not start until eight. We had an hour to kill so we went down to the market, we did... It was only when we left the market that we realised what we had done.’

‘What did you do, Grandpa?’

‘Spent all the ticket money on food, had none for the train. Took the whole summer to pay Mrs Baker back. ‘Course train tickets did not cost much back then.’

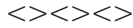
Edith laughs like she has not already heard this story a few hundred times before. However, this time she pays attention to what really matters, the train station. She has not been back there since the war ended, and Iris left. There is no need for the train in her small town and she would prefer it if she never has to see that station again, not until it is time.

‘Who are those for? Those flowers peeking out of your bag?’ His eyes squint at them, desperate to see, so Edith takes them out, leaving one lily at the bottom of her bag. She passes the two over to him and walks over to the mantelpiece where a vase of dead flowers rests.

‘I got those for you and Grandma, and these ones are for Mother.’

‘I have seen them far too many times these days. They use them red ones at the funerals, poppies for the young men. They smell of death.’

The room is still with respectful sadness. It has not been long since the war ended and mothers and fathers down the street are crying each day. Soldiers walk the streets delivering M.I.A. letters more than the post boys deliver newspapers. Edith is often thankful that her grandpa is ill; otherwise, he would have gone to fight too.

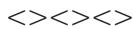


Dear Eddie,

My time here has improved, however slightly. I have been outside in our small garden tending to what is left of our old flowers. I am going to take your advice. One of the boys I saw knocked on my door while I was busy with the daisies. He said that they had just discovered something interesting in the ruins of the local butchers. I am planning on joining them tomorrow.

While my mum is acting nice, I do believe it is an act. Her smiles are forced. We should both be spending more time with our mums. Which is why I think you should hold off on coming to London so soon. You should at least wait until the streets are cleared. Who knows what dangerous items have been left behind.

Love, Iris.



It is dark outside, so dark that Edith can barely see the streets. She walks down by the river admiring the flowers she left behind, which seem to glow in the moonlight. Passed the shops that are not open yet, and down to the old oak tree that used to carry beautiful leaves. She climbs up high, taller than the streetlights. At the top of the tree is a little alcove. Edith shoves her hand inside and pulls out a pile of letters, her most treasured ones.

Even when they were together, they would send letters, little secrets they shared but dared not say aloud. On the top of the pile is their last in-person letter. Iris had turned some of Mrs Cooper's

old veg into colours and stained the parchment purple.

She packs them away in her little satchel and plunges deeper into the tree's centre. This time she pulls out a bag of shiny coins, wishes that were thrown into the well with hope.

Edith hops down from the tree and continues her sunrise walk. In her head she begins to plan out a letter, answers for her mother. No, she did not want to keep all of this a secret. This was not because of her or anyone else. This was about Iris and the wonderful time they spent amidst the war. London is far but she knows what to do. Her grandpa's stories have told her enough about train travel, and Iris has spoken fondly of her home and how to get to it.

She keeps reassuring herself the whole way to the train station until she is interrupted by Mr Parkinson, the postman.

'Oh, Edith, going somewhere?' he says, but all Edith can think about is how much her feet already hurt.

'Just a morning stroll.'

'Well, while you are here. I know I am not supposed to do this; however, I also know how excited you have been, and I may as well since you are here.'

She is confused for a moment until she sees him pull out an envelope with her name on it, the same shape as the many letters that Iris has sent her. Without looking she places it in her pocket, saving it for the journey.

'Thank you, sir.'

'Bye now, Edith, say hello to your mother for me.'

With that she continues towards the train station, where she sits on a wooden bench and waits patiently for her train.

The letter sits in Edith's coat pocket. Sealed, its weight is heavier than Edith knows.

When the train arrives, she sits down on a plush red seat, the cushion making a satisfying *poof* noise. She is the first one on and hopefully the only person to get on at this station. Who knows what would happen if the next door neighbour boarded the train knowing she is supposed to be in bed?

The train starts moving with rhythm, so Edith sits comfortably in her seat. It is not until she gets peckish that her hand reaches into her pocket in search of a forgotten treat and comes upon the letter. The return address is the same as Iris's home address, but the handwriting is different. Edith rips open the back of the envelope and pulls the parchment out. This too is different to what Iris would write on and much less crumpled. The delicate paper unfolds in her hand to present a kindly written letter from Iris' mother.

As she gets closer to the end of the letter, her eyes tear up, letting drops of salty water hit the parchment below. The ink spreads.

She reaches into her satchel's front pocket. She takes out the pink flower she picked for Iris and kept closely to ensure she did not crush it. Edith stares into the flower as she twirls it in her fingers. A mirage of red flurries past the windows, filling the train carriage with a glowing rouge hue.

Poppies.

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Dear Eddie,

I hope this letter finds you well. This is Iris' mum writing. I have some information to tell you about my little flower. Iris is dead. She passed away some time ago. I know you were good

friends with her, I see the letters coming and going all the time.

It happened a while ago and I am sorry I did not write sooner; I was so distraught but now that I have a clearer mind, I can see how awful I must be to let you continue wondering why there are no replies.

I will send you the letters if you want. I have not read any of them, and I will not out of respect, but they should be with one of you. I would also love to speak more. I wish to know Iris better. She changed so much coming back from the war, in a better way, she was so happy yet also so sad.

They know how she died, but I am afraid I cannot write it down. Perhaps we could meet and talk about our Iris some day? I wish to get to know the young lady who was friends with Iris while she was away from home.

From, Maria.

# Reflections

Emily Lyon

Emily Lyon was born in Lincoln, where she is now working towards her Creative Writing degree. As both a reader and a writer, she is drawn to character-driven realism. She also volunteers at a local charity bookshop, which is largely responsible for her lack of shelf space.



Leah has been dreading today. She smooths the blue-flowered cotton of her skirt over her knees and shifts on her wooden stool. Nine easels circle her, eighteen eyes watch her. What she would give to abandon her body, to leave it here, unaccompanied, until the art session is over. Instead, she is stuck inside herself with nothing to do but think.

The art group meet every other week at a small community centre. It is an old, ruined room, full of character. The window is wider at the bottom than the top, thick cracks cut through the ceiling paint, the floorboards are scarred by art materials and dance shoes. A thin band of light stretches across Leah's toes, bare except for chipped blue nail varnish. At the sun's touch, the dust on the floor – thicker in the wood's chips and ridges – glitters gold.

'Keep your head up,' Mallory told Leah before this session began. 'If you don't know where to look, look at me.'

Mallory is a cloud of purple hair in the centre of the group. She is sitting on the floor, her long legs folded beneath her, wedging something under her easel. Somehow, she always ends up with the wobbly one. Leah smiles to herself and, when Mallory sees her, she flashes her middle finger, laughing too.

It was Mallory who first brought Leah to one of these sessions, and who suggested, after weeks of drawing fruit and flowers, that they take turns to model instead. It is just an exercise, Leah tells herself. And yet she knows that these people are looking at her in the way she looks at herself: second-guessing every detail, focusing on her imperfections. To draw her, they must do so. She has done the same when drawing them.

There is no clock in the room, and so Leah has no way of

knowing how much time has passed, or how much is left. She smooths her skirt again, dampening the cotton with sweat from her palms. Every artistic rendition, she thinks, is more a mirror than an imitation. Surely other people's perceptions of her are just as real as the way she sees herself.

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The letter arrived eleven months ago. Leah had to read it several times; the pulsing dread inside her blurred the words. It was an eviction notice. Her landlord was selling her flat and she had three months to find somewhere else to live.

She sat on the kitchen work surface with the letter in one hand and her phone in the other, not knowing who to call. She had very few friends. It had been two years since she graduated from university, and she had fallen out of touch with everyone she met there. Her parents would worry and try to make her move back home, which Leah wanted to avoid if she could; she was twenty-three years old and had not lived at home since she was eighteen.

In the end, she called no one.

'Deborah,' Leah said, at the end of her shift. She worked as a waitress at a local restaurant, a job she had picked up four years before, while she was still at university. 'Can I talk to you for a sec?'

Her boss waved her into the office, a small, cramped space with stacks of paperwork on every surface. 'What's up? Are you handing in your notice?'

'No. The opposite, actually.' The chatter of the restaurant hummed between them. Leah pushed the door closed and then,

when a thick, uncomfortable silence ensued, regretted it. ‘I was wondering if you had any more shifts available.’

‘Ah.’ Deborah picked up a paper rota and said, without looking at it, ‘We’re pretty full right now. You know how it is.’

Leah nodded, masking her frustration with faked agreement. Almost every shift she worked felt short-staffed and disorganised. ‘I could really, really do with the extra money right now,’ she said. ‘Can you bear me in mind if anything comes up?’

‘Of course.’

When Leah made to leave, Deborah called after her.

‘Hey, what’s going on with you? You’ve never expressed money worries before.’

‘No, it’s just... I have to move out of my flat, and I’m struggling to find anywhere else in my price range.’

She had been to a few viewings, always the same. The flats were fancy and expensive, or bare and damaged but expensive anyway. The only house shares she had found were for students, and moving further afield would mean dealing with transport costs as well as rent.

‘Look,’ Deborah said. ‘I’ll bump you up my list. If shifts come available, you get first dibs. Don’t tell the others.’

‘Thanks,’ Leah said. When she took this job, she intended it to be temporary. How was she still here after so many years, neither happy nor valued?

‘Try not to stress about it,’ Deborah said before she left the room. ‘Things’ll work out, Leah. They always do.’

Leah spent long nights worrying instead of sleeping, scrolling through her options in the dark. The brightness of her phone screen, too much even on the lowest setting, drew tears from her eyes.

Maybe she'd have to move back in with her parents, but they lived two hours away. If Leah went home, she would have to leave her job, and she had little confidence in her ability to get another one. It was all such a mess; the extra shifts she had were not enough, the money was not enough, the time she had left to sort something was dwindling too fast.

Then, one morning, Deborah messaged her:

*A friend's friend is looking for a flatmate. Not too far from here, the place is apparently small but nice, would just be two of you. She's 26, PhD art student, called Mallory. Want me to send details?*

Leah accepted the offer straight away. An option was an option and there were not many of those left.

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Trying not to move her head, Leah scans the room. It smells like the art classes of her childhood: paint fumes, oil pastels, the faintest hint of sweat. The rectangle of light has moved from her toes to her ankle now, highlighting a small cluster of hairs she missed when she shaved her legs.

Today, Mallory is drawing with a packet of children's felt-tip pens – the kind which dry up, fray and squeak. In the past she has painted with berries and tea, made collages with matchsticks, staples and cigarette butts collected from the park. In contrast, when Leah is the artist and not the model, she draws with a single pencil.  
2B.

Leah imagines the shape of herself taking form on canvases she cannot see. Thin white legs. Small, round shoulders. Long blonde hair, not quite straight and not quite wavy, frizzy near the roots.

She straightens her back, wishing she had something to lean against. Before now, has she ever had so much uninterrupted thinking time? Life is full of distractions: screens to look at, books to read, people to talk to, work to do. Even at night, thinking is accompanied by – and a hindrance to – attempts to fall asleep. This is different. Until the session ends, her only task is to sit here.

And so, the long threads of thoughts in Leah's mind unspool. Shopping lists, last night's television programmes, work, song lyrics. How she has said and done so many embarrassing things in her life – more, surely, than other people. The things she has seen on the news, boundless suffering. How she has not called her mum for a while, too long. What to buy for Mallory's birthday – would new art materials be too basic? How she wishes she found it easier to be honest, with herself and other people, about how she really feels.

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Half-dead flowers, gently dismantled, cluttered the floor between them. Leah picked up a lily and peeled away a petal, pale and slender. The edges were crisp and curling, but the middle had not quite lost its softness. Mallory's hands were full of roses and carnations, pollen-pink rims around her nails.

'How are we arranging them?' Leah said, eyeing the scattered flower heads, leaves, and snapped stems. It was a botanical massacre.

Mallory looked at the board they had prepared for the flowers. ‘Colour order?’ she said. ‘I suppose it doesn’t really matter what it looks like, this is just to test the technical element.’ She was planning a series of flower-based art pieces as part of her PhD. She wanted the petals to decay on the canvas.

After experimenting with a couple of designs, they arranged the petals in waves, the darkest in the top left corner and the lightest in the bottom right. Roses, azaleas, carnations, peonies, dahlias, lilies, jasmine. Pink descended into white, colour into colourlessness. Mallory put some music on, slow classical pieces that Leah recognised but could not name, and then they began to pin the flowers into place. The light cast by the ceiling bulb was soft and yellow. Leah’s back hurt from hunching over the board.

Nights like this were new and precious. Leah had moved in with Mallory three weeks earlier, but for years before that she had spent her evenings alone, reading or watching television or scrolling on her phone, falling asleep early because there was nothing else to do. She had never considered herself lonely, had dreaded, even, the prospect of sharing a living space with another person. But being with Mallory was not like Leah thought it would be. It was comforting to see someone else’s things lying around: almond milk shower gel on the edge of the bath, stacks of dog-eared art books in the living room, a long-handled brush thickly wound with hair.

She slid a pin through a dahlia. The head of the flower was still whole, the petals too small to be separated from it, and the centre crumbled around the thin metal.

‘Are you working tomorrow?’ Mallory asked.

‘No, there weren’t any shifts.’

‘Do you want to meet me for lunch in town? I’m meeting with

my supervisor, but I should be done by one.'

The room was tender with music. They had known each other for so little time, but often when they talked, Leah felt that her skin had become invisible, that Mallory could see straight through to the hidden, vulnerable parts of her.

'Okay,' Leah said. 'That sounds nice.'

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The art room has reached a state of such deep focus that any movement would feel a form of destruction. The scrap of sunlight has grown and stretches across Leah's waist, warming her. When did the air become so thick and tainted? She has adjusted to the smell of the paint fumes but can feel them inside her, pressing at the edges of her brain like the beginning of a headache.

Mallory is working on something at the top of her canvas and has not looked up for a while. Leah longs to climb off her stool and see what she is drawing. Has she used three of the colours? Ten? Does it look like Leah, or some abstract version of her?

'Be patient,' Mallory said earlier, when Leah asked what she was planning. 'I want it to be a surprise.'

Leah has spent months being patient. In contrast, this is nothing.

She closes her eyes and wishes someone would open the window. She wants the cool, outside air on her bare shoulders. She wants to hear the birds singing.

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‘Did you love him?’ Leah asked, stretching her legs so her socked feet rested on Mallory’s knees.

‘We only went on one date.’

‘Did you *like* him, then?’ The wine in Leah’s glass was the same colour as the velveteen sofa they were sprawled across: a deep, reddish purple. It was dark outside, and the blinds were open, the sky a black, liquid square enclosed in the window’s glass. Headlights and streetlamps illuminated moving patches on the walls.

‘He was nice,’ Mallory said. She was a shadow in the darkening room, her features indistinct.

‘But?’

‘I don’t know. I just didn’t really feel anything, any kind of attraction.’

Leah could feel the wine moving inside her, blurring the boundary between her thoughts and the things she said out loud. She felt incoherent, exhilarated. ‘Maybe he just wasn’t your type.’

‘I don’t think I was his, either, to be fair,’ Mallory said. ‘I haven’t heard from him since.’

‘Maybe he’s waiting for you to message him.’

‘Don’t,’ Mallory said, pulling a pillow over her face. ‘I’ll feel bad if I think about it too much. I hate dating.’

‘So why do you do it?’ Leah laughed. ‘You should avoid it like I do. Accept the inevitability of dying alone.’

Mallory leant across the back of the sofa and turned on the big lamp at the wall. The light was dazzling, too white. Small splinters of it caught in the rim of Leah’s glass.

‘Leah, you’re twenty-three,’ Mallory said. ‘You have years until you die.’ She paused for a moment. ‘I assume I can infer, then, that you haven’t been seeing anyone?’

‘You know I would’ve told you if I had.’



Leah looked to the window but could only see their reflections. With the light on, they were exposed to anyone who might look in. She finished the contents of her glass and set it on the coffee table, then wrapped her arms around her legs.

‘You want more?’ Mallory asked.

Leah shook her head. On nights like this, a combination of alcohol and Mallory’s patient attention siphoned the quiet out of her. Leah was not used to talking so much, to the almost dizzying sense of calm that it instilled within her. In the early days, it had been easy to get carried away; to drink too much, to become distracted. How many of their conversations could she no longer remember? How much of herself did she give away in those moments, pieces which had become, by then, irretrievable?

Leah looked back to the window, then stood up and pulled the blind down. The room felt smaller and kinder, then. She sat back down next to Mallory.

‘What have you been working on?’ Leah said.

‘You don’t want to hear about that.’

‘Yes, I do.’

‘You’re drunk,’ Mallory laughed, but she picked up her laptop and began to read from her thesis.

Maybe Leah was drunk. The paragraphs slipped out of her reach, hung like strange clouds in the room. Most of the sentences were only sounds to her; long strings of words without meanings, syllables colliding in the air. It was Mallory’s voice Leah was listening to, more than anything else. The familiar shape, colour, resonance of it.

It must be nice, Leah thought, to have something so important to work towards. Her own career was still directionless, an endless cycle of restaurant shifts. She wanted to pause her life, to stay

forever in this room, in this moment.

Mallory fell silent, glanced up. 'Are you bored yet?'

'No. Keep reading.'

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The sun is on Leah's face, obscuring the left half of her vision. She cannot tell how much time has passed, though her legs are numb and leaden.

She is thinking about how easily she could have been born in a different body, in a different place. This thought occurs to her every time she reads the news, every time she hears that a person she once knew – or even a stranger – has died. She knows she is lucky, that her life is uncomplicated – at least in contrast to other people's. Why, then, are there days when her sadness overwhelms her until she can hardly speak, when her fear holds her at gunpoint in the corners of crowded rooms? Here she is, sitting in her blue and white dress, all of her anxieties floundering around inside her. Here she is, worrying about things she has already said and cannot take back, the way other people perceive her, things which may or may not happen, the hypothetical pain that their occurrence would cause. But though she understands that these worries are small, she knows also that they can consume a person. Have they not, for so many years, consumed her?

Mallory smiles behind her easel, runs a clumsy hand through her hair. So much of the human experience, Leah thinks, is built on interactions with other people, good or bad. She takes a deep breath and lets herself sink back into memory.

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Half of Mallory's hair was pinned up, stripped pale, and the rest hung purple and damp in Leah's hands. Dye ran through the creases of her too-big plastic gloves. Their laughter pulsed through the kitchen. Quiet music seeped through the skirting boards from the next room.

'What if I ruin your hair?' Leah asked.

'You won't.'

When Leah said nothing, Mallory reached for her hand, squeezed it. Warm skin through gloves. White fingers stained purple.

'Worst case scenario,' Mallory said, 'I'll cut it off and start over.'

Leah held the stepladder still as Mallory climbed it to paint the ceiling. Both of them were flecked with white paint.

'Don't fall,' Leah said. The sharp edges of the metal frame were hurting her hands, but she was afraid to loosen her grip. From above, Mallory laughed at her.

They practised interview questions in the kitchen, lines of sticky notes on the table between them. And then the real thing: a small room and a borrowed blazer, two women who nodded and smiled every time Leah spoke.

The new job was at an art gallery. As soon as Leah was offered the role, she accepted it.

'Do you think this was a bad idea?' she asked Mallory. She had handed in her notice at the restaurant by then. If anything went wrong, she would be jobless.

Mallory gave her a blunt, serious look. 'You were so unhappy before,' she said. 'This is necessary.' When silence dulled the air

between them, she said, ‘You can do it, Leah. It’ll be fine.’

They sat, facing each other, in a puddle of sunlight on the living room floor, a deck of cards spilt between them. Both of them had forgotten the rules.

They caught the train to Leah’s hometown. Rows of trees stood parallel to the railway line. Purple fields stretched out into mist. Returning to the place she was born – especially with Mallory – felt strange to Leah, like she was travelling both backwards and forwards in time. The different pieces of her life merged to form one entity.

They had dinner with Leah’s parents and then went for a walk, just the two of them. Leah chose the river path she had loved as a teenager, and as they stood alone, the water still and silver beside them, she realised how loud and spaceless the city could be, how oppressive.

‘Your parents are nice,’ Mallory said. ‘They didn’t act at all bored when I was talking about my PhD.’

‘That’s because it’s not boring. And they liked you, I could tell.’

Mallory, usually so unshakeable, looked embarrassed, like she did not know what to say. She glanced down at the ducks kicking in the reeds. ‘It’s so pretty here,’ she said. ‘I could make so much art.’

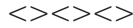
‘We’ll come back, then,’ Leah said, ‘when we have more time. We’ll stay a few days, and you can create whatever you want.’

‘Thank you,’ Mallory said. And then, a moment later, ‘Do you ever miss living here?’

Leah looked around. ‘There are things I miss, yeah. But there are things I’d miss more if I moved back.’

Summer dresses. Bus journeys. Late-night conversations. Sliced strawberries in the fridge. Mallory’s touch – a drunken embrace,

catkins pulled from Leah's hair – which may or may not have meant something. Stained coasters. Diced onions. Their shoes mixed up in a basket by the door.



The sun has abandoned Leah and remains only as a tiny glittering cube against the far wall. She moves her toes over the ridges in the wooden floor. The dust still shimmers slightly but its glow has been diminished by the loss of natural light.

Mallory steps out from behind her easel, yawning as she walks. When she reaches the window, she tucks her fingers underneath the lower pane, white paint flaking off against her hands, and lifts.

The outside world is a deep, cool breath. Traffic and laughter; crisp, blue air. The city is in Leah's lungs; she is undone by it. It disassembles her and then puts the pieces back together, bleached clean.

Soon, Leah will see her multicoloured body on Mallory's canvas and her perception of herself will change forever. Mallory will tidy her pens away, then the two of them will walk around the room and look at the other pieces, endless reflections of Leah's reality, of the self she has been trying for so long to define.

Time is fluid, teasing. How long is left? Leah wants both to stay in the safe, thought-filled bubble of this session and to be freed from it, to fall headfirst into an evening with Mallory. Laughter and reassurances. A meal eaten together on the living room floor.

Beyond these small details, the future warps out of Leah's grasp. It is impossible to predict what might happen to her and Mallory: success or failure, joy or heartbreak, health or illness. Leah

wants, with an intensity that distorts her body, to know where they will be in a month, a year, ten years, to know that they will be okay.

The art room hums with the energy of something almost over; people are beginning to form groups, to whisper conversations, to pack their materials away. Leah remains still for the people who have not yet finished painting. She feels on the brink of something, balanced on a precipice from which she could fall at any moment. This is life, she thinks. Unpredictable, uncertain. Every moment, every choice, existing on the cusp of an unknown future.

Thin birdsong twists through the window. Mallory is smiling at her canvas, a felt-tip pen tucked behind her ear, and Leah waits for the moment she will look up and meet her eyes.

# The Angel

Alexis Crawley

Alexis Crawley is a Coventry-born writer and poet. She is pursuing a BA in Creative Writing, at the University of Lincoln, and has her sights set on an MA. If she isn't furiously typing at her desk, you can probably find her behind a bar shaking up some cocktails.

Bathed in the hue of carbon light, the men formed a tight-lipped circle. The physician stood before the window, blocking their vision of what lay behind.

‘Do you think she’s an angel?’ asked the chemist.

The question had been neglected the last ninety-eight hours – since they had entered the facility. They allocated themselves into pairs, rotating their observations through days in the laboratory, absent of sun. While the physician and the chemist slept, the psychoanalyst and the biologist worked. The priest, commissioned by the state, had no such companion and no routine. He loitered behind the rest of the men. To them, he was a bleak reminder of the blockade that prevented a headway in their research.

‘What makes you think *it* is a *she*?’

Their studies had yet to commence. Restricted by the wall and window between them, the group could only theorise from afar, stealing glances at the figure dipped in shadow. The facility was comprised of one long corridor holding four rooms: the living quarters, the bathroom, the kitchen, and the observation room, which the specimen’s cell was adjoined to. The cell had no entrance of its own besides a tray door, as if the walls had been built around her.

‘Her proportions are that of a female,’ said the physician, referencing to the numerous sketches he had drawn. The figure made no move to interact with anything that had been put into her cell. They had passed numerous bowls of food through the tray door, all of which sat untouched, clusters of mould beginning to sprout between slithers of bread. The men had since ceased their attempts at feeding her. Her bare figure crouched in the corner



without motion, and had done the entire time.

‘Angels,’ announced the priest, ‘Do not have a sex. They are messengers of God. You can see, even in the absence of light, the qualities in which she is lacking.’

In sketch and cell alike, the men surveyed the level finish of her chest. The absent crevice between her legs. They were deprived of her face, which she held angled away as if in quiet rebellion.

‘Angel or not, she’s female. I’m certain,’ the biologist declared. And the air became hungry.

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Within the following twenty-eight hours, they had grown accustomed to calling her *the angel*, but never she. Only *it*. The psychoanalyst had urged the others to abandon their unfounded hypotheses and tread further into physical testing. The priest observed their debate from afar but, to their surprise, raised no opposition.

‘They say we must study the face of the angel,’ said the physician. ‘My drawings alone have not satisfied their demand for answers.’

‘How do we get it to turn?’ asked the chemist. The men stood, pretending to think. They had each already settled on numerous ways to pry her from the darkness. Between them lay silent understanding, their hearts beating in synchrony.

The psychoanalyst began first. The men were all present for his experiment. The chemist’s jaw sat taunt, spurred into tension by the biologist’s tapping foot. The physician nursed a cigarette, lit between his tucked lips. The priest stood, waiting.

From the communal bedroom, the psychoanalyst retrieved a violin from his trunk. He propped open the tray door with the

priest's Bible and traced the bow up and down the strings with a liquid proficiency. After minutes of the angel's same nothingness, he abandoned the piece and transitioned from melody into curt, anarchic strokes. The piercing grew with his frustration, technicality sacrificed with each bow until the sound became one strident, serrated note.

The chemist pointed damply. The physician's cigarette expired. The playing ceased.

The chemist's voice wavered, 'Did you see that? The skin?'

'What happened?' begged the psychoanalyst. 'What about its skin?'

'It sort of...shivered.'

'It rippled, like water,' said the biologist.

The psychoanalyst scoffed and waved an arm to the physician, coaxing his attempt. 'Regardless of whether it shivered or rippled, we know it reacts to auditory stimuli. Go, test another.'

The physician turned towards the men, his voice unfeeling.

'You won't like what I have planned.'

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Outside of the observation room, at the very end of the hall, was the door from which they had entered. They had been blindfolded upon their arrival but knew they were underground from the stairs they were led down and the absence of windows. It had been close to a week since they had arrived. The biologist pretended he didn't see movement in the dark. The priest welcomed it. Each man had a letter on his bed, a simple set of instructions.

*Study it.*

*Keep it alive.*

The physician plucked a box of matches from his pocket and pulled a dozen pages from his sketchbook that lay on the table before the window. Reaching his hand through the tray door, he set the paper alight. The priest hummed disapprovingly. The chemist watched from afar, seeing if the change in light and heat would stir the angel. The biologist stood close, his breath fogging the glass. His eyes traced the form of the angel, waiting for her body to react to the sensation of fever, the taste of soot. Plumes of smoke began to fill the cell and cautiously seep into the territory of the men. A projection of her shadow upon the wall, mocking them.

The physician fed the fire more paper, plumes of black smoke filling the already-stale air.

‘You’ll kill us *and* it if you carry on,’ said the psychoanalyst.

‘Just a little longer. I want to see how much she can take,’ the biologist whispered, his eyes trained on the angel.

The physician’s breath became ragged. The smoke grew thicker, the sight of the angel almost completely blocked. The chemist rose and pulled the physician aside, attempting to smother the fire with a futile batting of his sleeve through the tray door. The psychoanalyst watched as the biologist forced closer to the window, pressing the globe of his cheek upon the pane. To either side, the palms of his hands, pushing. The rest of the men stopped to watch him. A pathetic display of instability.

‘I want to try,’ said the chemist. Despite the meekness of his voice, the vice had burrowed itself within his eyes and lay visible to the others. Between their oxygen-deprived wheezing and the angel’s perpetual stillness, curiosity had spiked.

The chemist retrieved a contraption from his case, slender and novel. From the depth of his pocket, he recovered a sack, embracing a citrine powder; the only glimpse of sun in their prison, time

thwarted between concrete walls and the unattainable *it*.

From the contraption came a flame and, on a pedestal above it, sat their imitation sun in a white dish. The other men cast their judgements aside, convinced by the assured manner in which the chemist moved.

He stripped himself of his shirt and tied it around his face. ‘I suggest you do the same, the gas should not stray too far into this room, but the smell is... unpleasant.’

All but the priest, whose attire was one fluid robe, bound their shirts around their heads. The gas was colourless but eventually detectable by the distinct odour that slipped between the cracks of the tray door – the stench of rot. The biologist rubbed his watering eyes, the combination of smoke and decay inescapable in their confines. The physician released a piteous cough.

‘The gas,’ said the psychoanalyst between retches. ‘What is it?’

‘Sulphur dioxide,’ said the chemist. The priest turned to face him.

“Then the Lord rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstone and fire – from the Lord out of heaven.” Look at how our angel does not react, acting above punishment.’

The physician scoffed. ‘If you deem yourself so knowledgeable, then you try something. Make her react.’

The chemist concluded his experiment, and the priest stepped forth.

From the pocket concealed in the interior of his robe, the priest revealed a blade. He dragged the edge through the flesh of his palm, releasing a surge of blood. The biologist cocked an eyebrow in interest. From his fingers, the priest traced intricate shapes upon the window. Extensive trails of lineage. The symbols unfamiliar to the rest of the men, who had stiffened at the perversity.

The priest stood before the angel, resting a stained hand upon the glass.

“Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the world of truth.”

The priest began to chant in hallowed tongues. His voice rose to barbarous heights, his eyes crazed in feverish passion.

The angel did not move, but the biologist did.

He left the observation room for their living quarters, his breath heavy and chest heaving. Through the priest's continuous howling, the chemist, the psychoanalyst, and the physician could hear the biologist's trunk being opened, his books being strewn across the room. The sound of unbridled desperation. The smell of lingering toxins and sweat.

The biologist re-entered the room. In his hand, a whip.

The chemist raised his hands in defence, ‘Hold on now!’

Using the handle, the biologist smashed his way through the window. Smoke and gas trickled out like water, hot inside their lungs. Shards of glass split beneath their feet. The biologist only continued towards the angel, glass imbedding itself within his palm as he began to climb through the broken window.

‘He mustn't!’ yelled the chemist, dismayed at the psychoanalyst's intrigue and the physician's delight.

The priest placed a firm hand upon the chemist's shoulder, his eyes dour but the corner of his lips pulled into a smile. ‘Our Lord has sent us a challenge. Your will must not falter. You must believe that we are good.’

The chemist stared dimly, before resting his eyes upon the angel. Her skin glazed.

‘You see, boy, how she tempts you.’

The biologist stood with his back turned to the men, waiting. They filed into the cell through the broken window. The physician

brought with him a candle. The psychoanalyst loosened his tie. The blockade of their bodies blocked the sight of anything else.

Only her.

Only them.

The sound of their panting grew louder, the biologist releasing a choked laugh. He dragged his fingers down the tendrils of the whip, raised his hand above his head, and struck. She made no cry of pain. Instead, a second snapping sound, thicker than the first, reverberated between their bodies.

The angel had woken up, and their smiles had been pulled away.

Where the snap of the whip was clean, the snap of bones was like gravel. She dragged herself onto her feet, clawing up the wall for stability. Her body contorted itself into something more. The sound of jagged crunching, followed by limbs flailing and skin stretching. Elbows extended inward towards protruding ribs. The men watched her shoulder blades rip through the alabaster skin of her back.

The priest reached out while the rest of the men stood, suspended in place. His hand grazed the flesh of her arm.

At last, the angel faced the men.

The face of the angel held no features, only a pale stretch of skin where eyes, nose, and mouth should be. From the hole that consumed the entirety of her face, she released a chorus of sound. Overlapping voices, growing louder.

The candle burnt out, and the men became something less.

# New Perfume

Sam Kenny-Whitehead

Sam Kenny-Whitehead is a writer currently based in Lincoln. They are studying Creative Writing, and hopes to one day publish fantasy and horror designed to make their readers cry. Sam won a plastic trophy for writing at Pontins in 2008, and it's been downhill since.

Robin didn't know why she cried. It happened late at night, when she had to muffle her sobs so she wouldn't wake Tyler. Like clockwork, agony each time he came home tasting of vodka and cigarettes. He swore he didn't smoke, but she could taste it on her tongue, her teeth, and everywhere else his mouth had touched. Robin lay awake with the disgust while Tyler snored beside her, underwear tangled around his ankles. It felt like the world had ended long ago, that the last twenty years of Robin's life, and all the years to come, were all part of a prolonged, dying gasp that nobody but Tyler would hear. And he wouldn't care.

The room smelt of flowers. Sweet and fresh, filling the air without source and obliterating the stench of sweat and semen. Robin took a breath, one that felt like the first time in a long time. She was warm. Her head felt heavy.

Tyler grunted and it was gone. All was normal again, down to the rings where her tears hit the sheets. He threw an arm over where she should have been laid, and missed. Robin felt her face and realized she had stopped crying.

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Tyler slapped at an alarm that wasn't ringing. Robin shook him, then shook him harder. Mornings weren't kind to him when he'd been drinking, which made it Robin's job to make sure he went to work.

'I thought I said to give me a minute,' he grumbled into his pillow.



‘Breakfast’s ready, honey.’

Coffee. French-pressed, cream and sugar and a poorly drawn leaf in the foam. Robin tried her best, redrawing it again and again until the coffee cooled, and she had to rush it upstairs. It didn’t matter. He drank it without opening his eyes.

‘A bit sweet,’ he said, taking another sip.’

‘Sorry. My fault.’

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Robin cooked, cleaned, paid the bills, and ran out of things to do before eleven o’clock. There was nothing else to do, so she sat and stared at the wall, listening to the sounds of kids playing on the street through a window that wouldn’t open more than an inch. She thought of the garden she’d always wanted but didn’t have. Somewhere to decorate with flowers and plant fruit trees her children would grow up alongside. Instead, dotted around the house were a few cacti and a dozen tall, leafy breeds that survived even the roughest care. Her favourite, the snake plant by the door, smelt of vanilla only when she got close.

Her phone buzzed, and Robin didn’t answer it. Then it buzzed again and she saw an hour had passed.

*‘meeting went well going out to celebrate back late’* read Tyler’s first message. The second, sent only after Robin hadn’t replied, asked, *‘did u want to come?’*

*‘Good job honey! Have a great time, I’ll see you tonight. X’*

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The foundation creaked like a dying fox. It was louder at night, echoing through large rooms and long hallways barren of both furniture and decoration. A home from a catalogue, pretty but sterile. Unfit for human habitation. Not that Robin felt very human. She had stopped getting hungry, stopped getting cold, stopped feeling much of anything except absence. And if that's all she was, how could Robin consider herself much of a human being?

The smell was back. A scent too wonderful to be of the house. Smothering, with a hint of citrus and spice, and this time, it wasn't alone. Something was there. Robin was sure of it. She could feel it in her skin and bones; something was just outside, past the kitchen door, waiting for her. Sweat formed on her forehead. It would be so easy, so simple, to walk over and open the door to see it. Whatever it was, it smelt of spring.

Tyler was home, bursting in the room drunk and loud. Robin could smell only lemon cleaner and polish. His eyes sparkled and Tyler didn't notice that when he pressed smoke-covered lips into Robin, she did not kiss him back.

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Bouquets were packed tight from floor to ceiling, so the walls were hidden behind an array of every colour and every scent, and Robin had spent the last hour indulging in every single one. Daisies felt like being wrapped in blankets before a fire. Roses, like the romance novels her mother used to read, yellowed with age even when Robin was a child. Magnolias were light and complex, but without a touch of sweetness and so fell short. If it wasn't here, she would check the next store, then the next, until she found whatever haunted her.

It was in a pot in the back, sitting alone on a shelf below a skylight that doubled as a spotlight. The Duchess of Nemours. A peony. Pink and delicate, the colour of a blush. It seemed shy in the way its petals interlocked and almost met, leaving a gap wide enough to only glimpse its centre. There was a yellow in there, richer and deeper than any Robin knew. The flower was young. It would only grow bolder with age. If someone helped it.

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Robin put the Duchess by the window of her bedroom, giving her a reason to open the curtains in the morning. The scent of spring would hit her hard, though was never as strong as it had been those strange few times, and it soon faded. By noon, the room was all cheap deodorant again.

‘New flower?’ It took weeks before Tyler noticed. The petals, still pale, had started to unfurl.

‘I like the way it smells.’

He climbed out of bed and pulled on yesterday’s boxers, shambling towards the Duchess on his way to his morning piss. With a drag like smoking a cigarette – short, deep, and an expression like it burned – Tyler inhaled and seemed left wanting.

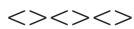
‘All flowers smell the same to me,’ he said. Robin had been back to the store daily, memorized a dozen flowers, and none were quite like that peony.

Tyler kissed her cheek, his stubble like a thousand needles, then walked off to piss with the door open. Urine hit the bowl with a high tinkle that made Robin’s skin itch. Spots on her neck, then her back, then everywhere and impossible to sate. She looked to the Duchess, needed some kind of distraction, but it wasn’t there. The flower was gone.

In its place was a rock. A chunk of concrete, a thing of angles and spikes and no discernible shape. The side facing the sun was smooth, but the rest was chaos and gave off the impression of having been ripped out of the ground. It was dark, speckled with thousands of tiny, white crystals that caught the light and made the thing look dusted with glitter. Robin stepped towards it, waited, then put a finger on the rock and felt pebbles break away at her touch.

‘Hey babe,’ Tyler called from the hall, and the Duchess was back. ‘Wanna hop in the shower with me?’

Robin looked down at her finger, felt and saw the indent from the stone in her skin, then looked to the peony again, before going to her husband.



Robin went back to the store so often that she soon felt compelled to buy more than just the one potted plant. Each day she returned home with bouquets of flowers that she'd soon dismantle and rearrange. It started as an excuse to fill time, but she was good at it. Each petal was placed with care, and soon the house was transformed into a place of colour and life. Everywhere except the bedroom, which was reserved for the Duchess.

The strange events grew only more frequent and longer, lasting for hours on days Tyler was out late. Peonies would flood the air and the concrete would replace something random while she cleaned, both often enough that Robin grew used to it. Expected it as another part of her daily routine. But the feeling of being watched, that she wasn't alone even in an empty house, never stopped thrilling her.

‘Hey, Tyler?’

They sat at dinner. Two steaks fresh from the butcher, grilled slow with too much pepper and too little tabasco. Tyler’s favourite.

‘Hmm? Yeah, babe?’ He didn’t look up from his phone.

‘I know work’s going well, and we don’t need the money,’ she began, hands hidden in her lap so he couldn’t see her twisting her ring. ‘But I’ve been working on my arrangements, and I’ve been getting quite good.’

She gestured to her newest piece: a playful array of violets and white roses she considered to be her best. Tyler looked to it, then to the several other vases in the room in turn, like he was noticing them each for the first time.

‘You made those?’ His phone buzzed, and he replied to his friend before continuing. ‘Figured you’d just bought them.’

‘Yeah. No. I worked really hard.’

‘So, what, you wanna sell them?’

‘The place I go has an opening and I think I could get it.’ The store was tiny, Robin had become a regular, and she had a master’s degree in plant science. ‘And I want it.’

‘Like, full time?’ She had his full attention now.

‘It’d only be while you’re at work anyway.’

‘Then sure.’ He shrugged and smiled only when he looked back at his group chat.

‘Great.’ The word *thanks* formed in her throat, caught, and died before she could spit it out.

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Tyler must’ve known something was wrong when Robin refused to sleep with him. It was part of their routine, as much as setting their alarm or brushing her teeth. She said she was too tired, because if

she'd told him that she just didn't want to, he'd get upset and she'd feel bad. Robin already felt terrible. For saying no, for getting angry, for wanting anything outside of him in the first place.

It was always the guilt, a hole that swallowed piece after piece of Robin until all that was left, all Robin was, was the guilt. He was awful to her, and Robin still wanted only to wrap her arms around him, kiss his neck and whisper lies about how much she wanted him, just to make that feeling go away. She hated herself, but was already turning to embrace him.

But then, the Duchess came. Robin felt her there, standing at her bedroom door. The same presence she'd felt weeks earlier, just closer. Much closer. If Robin turned, she'd see it. The scent of peonies made her dizzy and the moonlight cast a jagged shadow across the room from that awful rock, but neither registered. They were ordinary. Mundane. The Duchess was here, all else paled in comparison.

Robin had to know. She had to put a face to the thing that stalked her when she was most alone. The moment felt fleeting, so she whipped herself around and still caught only a glimpse. A white blur disappearing behind the door frame. The vague impression of a woman in a long dress. Only the hand that trailed behind, lingering in sight just a moment more than the rest, could Robin commit to memory. Thin, soft, unblemished by time or toil. A line of bone followed each finger down to the wrist, wrapped in a thin layer of skin that showed the blue of her veins.

That was all. The Duchess was gone. Tyler snored and his dead tooth stunk of rot and decay. Robin collected both a blanket and the peony on her windowsill, before heading downstairs and sleeping on the couch. She felt no guilt, but come morning, the rage was still fresh.

Robin moved the Duchess to a nicer pot with quality soil. The pittance she earned went towards plant food and nutrient mix, and in preparation for the boost in her growth, Robin carved a small strip she pressed against the stem to support her. It would never smell as strong as her visitor, but Robin cherished the flower all the same.

‘Won’t be home long,’ Tyler said by way of greeting. ‘I’m heading straight out. Put my food in the fridge?’

He didn’t come into the room to meet her, voice growing smaller as he climbed the stairs. Robin followed.

‘I was going to get takeout.’ The Duchess had been there. From the moment Tyler left for work till the second he got back. ‘I’ve not been feeling right today.

‘Probably just the weather.’ He was in their room, kneeling by his sock drawer and putting something in his pocket. ‘Have a nap or something, you’ll be alright tomorrow.

‘I need to talk to you.’

On his way to the door, Tyler found his uniform, crumpled where he’d left it the night before. He poked at it with his toe, like it was roadkill. ‘I’ll have to be home early to wash this. Gotta be up early too, maybe I’ll sleep on the couch tonight. Comfy enough for you, right? We’ll talk then?’

He smiled, so Robin shut her eyes and forced herself to take deep breaths. Lashing out would only make it harder, so she endured his lips on hers without comment.

‘Wow, yeah. You look awful. Later, babe.’

His footsteps were violent and it sounded like he was falling down the stairs. Robin stared at where he’d been standing, then

past it to the Duchess on her windowsill. Why was he so incapable of talking to her? Having a single, genuine conversation? Why could he only make time for her when she was on all fours.

The concrete was back and this time, its many peaks were matted crimson. Blood, thick and heavy, filled every hole, smoothing the thing and shining in the light like garnet. It dripped into the carpet, soaking into the fabric then pooling on top, growing faster than it should. Robin had to step back so her feet weren't stained. It didn't smell of iron, but something that by now was far more familiar.

'You didn't want to come, right babe?'

Traffic blared, so Robin knew the door was already open. His voice was distant and quiet, from a different world without rock or blood.

'Actually, yeah.' *Anywhere but here.* 'I do.'

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Tyler made it clear he didn't want her there in the same cowardly way he asked her to do his chores, so she ignored him. With each friend he stopped to collect, a new voice joined the choir and by the time the car was full, four men did their best to make Robin feel unwelcome. When it didn't work, they pulled up to a bar that nobody seemed to like instead of wherever they originally intended.

Hours later, after the first eight rounds, when Robin's silence had made them forget she was there, the group filed back into the car with cheers. None were fit to drive, save Robin who circled the block until she could pry some directions from them. It wasn't far,



a concrete building without windows and only a single neon sign for decoration, written in cursive that was impossible to read. The bouncer knew Tyler well enough to let them skip the line.

Inside was a single room, with bars built into opposite walls flanking a seating area that was kept dark. The tables wrapped around a central stage, elevated and adorned with a trio of metal poles stretching to the ceiling. The staff were all women, the customers all men. Only the customers were dressed.

Tyler looked pleased with himself, then caught Robin's eye as he scanned the room and panicked. She betrayed no emotion, so he must've thought himself safe and led the group to find a table. Robin had to drag a chair from elsewhere, and when she got back the men had packed themselves tight and she couldn't hear their conversation over the music.

A voice like a sports announcer declared the next performance was starting. Amidst a chorus of cheers, a woman emerged from the curtain at the back of the stage wearing a white veil and clothes covered with frills and lace that conjured the image of weddings. Then she started to dance, and it compared to nothing else. It started with slow movements and flashes of skin so brief they were nearly tasteful, drawing the audience in before the music grew heavy and clothes started to fall. The less she wore the more she moved. There seemed to be no limit to how far her legs could stretch.

The world fell away in chunks. Whatever tune had been blaring lost its melody and turned to static. All hundred lights grew brighter at the expense of everything else, turning anything off-stage to an impenetrable void too thick to see her table. She was as good as alone. Just Robin, and the dance.

And then she was the one on stage, with a thousand eyes fixed

on her as she pressed into a pole cold enough to cover her in goosebumps. Her clothes were replaced by a series of interlocking straps that hid little, and boots that went up her thighs with heels longer than her hands. Robin gripped the pole with both hands and both legs, then spun. One, two, five rotations before her feet hit the ground. The air caught her hair, and Robin felt free.

Everyone was gone, but Robin wasn't alone. One set of eyes still watched her press her spine to the pole and lower to her haunches. One woman watched Robin throw her head back and run her hands through her legs. Everything smelt of peonies, and a future Robin had yet to live. The straps peeled from her like a snake shedding its skin, and Robin knew she was naked only because the air was cold on her chest.

The Duchess watched in silence with bony hands folded in her lap. Robin couldn't see her face, but knew she had her attention and so, ignoring the pain in her muscles, Robin danced. Hair plastered on her back and each breath shook her body, but Robin danced, and did not stop dancing for what could have been minutes as easily as it could have been hours. Her knees gave out first, collapsing under her weight and robbing her of a finale. Robin landed as a heap of limbs and sweat, once again nothing more than a thirty-eight-year-old housewife.

The applause was deafening. A thousand versions of the Duchess, identical to one another and filling every seat in the building, heaped their praise onto her. Robin felt unworthy, then grateful. Her cheeks reddened, and finally, she simply felt goo

Robin sat with Tyler and his friends, holding a glass of beer she didn't like and watching the dancer leave the stage. Sweat covered her back, soaked into her clothes, and her skin was flush from exposure. A thousand emotions wracked her at once, but not shame, not guilt. Never again.

'I want a divorce.'

She'd said it without knowing she would, but even as her mouth formed the words, she understood it was true. It had been true for a long time. Every slight, every resentment, building and building until this. The end.

'What...?' He looked up at her from the couch, sluggish, drunk and only half-present.

'I said I want a divorce.'

Tyler stared at her with nothing behind his eyes, except maybe the memory of other women's tits. 'But—'

'I'm not happy. I haven't been happy in years.' Even to her, Robin's voice sounded different. Strong. Steady. Blunt, but only because she was so sure this was the right decision. 'What I have with you is not a life. I deserve better.'

His face twisted with the effort of forming a cohesive thought. 'No.'

Alcohol made his emotions easier to read, but she had caught him off guard and he flicked between expressions as often as he blinked.

'No?'

'I don't want a divorce. I love you, babe.' He smiled with a self-assurance that made Robin want to slap him.

'Well, I do. And it only takes one of us. I'll get my things.'

'I said no.' There was nearly a two-foot difference in their heights, and Robin felt every inch when Tyler stood. She felt small. 'You can't just give up on our marriage because you had one bad night. I love you, Robin. I won't give you up without a fight.'

'We aren't worth fighting for.' She chewed at her lip and took a step back. The gravity of the situation seemed to be penetrating

the alcohol, and his brow furrowed with a determination that Robin didn't like. 'I'm leaving, Tyler.'

She took a second step back, but he grabbed her wrist before she could move far enough away. Robin tried to yank herself free and failed. In response, Tyler tightened his grip until Robin could feel the cartilage bending under his fingers and knew her skin was quickly bruising.

'You aren't going anywhere.'

The air smelt of peonies, and Robin knew she had been saved. The furniture vanished, along with the plants and the mess, until the room was empty aside from Robin, Tyler, and the bloody chunk of concrete laying in the centre. Robin could feel her, standing in the next room and, for the first time, so could Tyler. He looked to where the Duchess waited with terror. Robin followed his gaze with a familiar smile.

Five fingers that were all bone wrapped around the frame, below which a white dress billowed in wind that wasn't there. The Duchess took long strides that never touched the ground, gliding at a pace befitting a Queen at her coronation. Robin could see her face now. All curves, each feature flowing into the next like an ancient statue, sculpted and polished and protected from the effects of time. Her lips were full, and her nose was small and her eyes – God, her eyes. Calm and soft and filled with all the warmth humanity was capable of. Hazel deeper than anything from a million forests.

The concrete appeared in the Duchess' grip without her back bending or pace slowing. It was just there, and she carried it as though it were weightless. Blood dripped a trail along the ground, pointing towards Tyler, who pressed himself, hysterical, against the wall. He looked to Robin, eyes searching for answers she wouldn't give him.

Only her arm moved, the Duchess raising the stone up high

so it caught the moonlight and scattered a red hue across the room. With grace and poise she brought it down again, cutting a clean arc through the air and into Tyler's nose. There was a crunch like walking on gravel, and he stopped screaming. Then another, and he stopped groaning. Then another, and another, and another until Robin couldn't recognize her husband anymore, because what was left was quiet and scattered across the walls.

The chunk landed in the pile that had been Tyler without sound, and finally the Duchess turned to Robin. Each blow had reflected back on her. It started as streaks of red from beneath her hair, but by then, Robin could see brain and bone, and one of those beautiful hazel eyes hung loose from its socket. Her dress had been soaked with blood from both the Duchess and the corpse. But she still looked so calm. Serene. The Duchess extended her hand to Robin, who did not hesitate to lock their fingers together.

The Duchess was soft and warm and everything Robin dreamed she would be.

# The Evolution of Derma Noir

Shea Grigg

Shea Grigg is a horror writer from Essex, studying Creative Writing at the University of Lincoln since 2022. As an aspiring author, when she's not working towards her BA, you'll find her procrastinating by doomscrolling or binging awful movies.

*Trigger Warnings: Mentions of Suicide and Suicidal Thoughts, Blood, Gore, and the Corpse of a Child.*

*Derma Noir*, a neurological condition triggered by a disturbance in a person's emotional regulation capabilities.

Affects individuals who have suffered through severe, sometimes repeated, traumatic experiences. Can be passed down through genetics and can affect an individual of any age.

In the early stages, the prefrontal cortex fragments due to suffering, and stem cells are sent across the body to attempt to heal the cause of discomfort. A dormant parasite is absorbed by cortisol (the stress hormone) which is attacked by white blood cells, causing it to activate and then multiply. It begins to siege regenerative cells in the patient's organ tissue, and infiltrates the epidermis, destroying the pigment. Small patches of a 'sickly grey' appear in the crevices of the body, until it spreads all over ridding the patient of any natural colour.

Damage to the medial prefrontal cortex removes aspects of the patient's sense of self. Neurotransmitters within the brain perish leaving the patient in perpetual emotional pain, overwhelming the mind and feeding the parasite. It creates visual and audible delusions, rendering patient's incapable of rational thought or differentiation between reality and fabrication.

At the start of the development, patients have reported: anhedonia, short temper/heightened irritability, anxiety, prolonged depressive episodes, intrusive thoughts, and paranoia – all of which get worse as the disorder develops. Due to the decline in their mental health, the patient enters a cycle of harmful behaviour: isolation, poor hygiene, recklessness, impulsivity, and addiction.

There have been 139 recorded cases as of August 2034, with

ninety-five percent ending in suicide.

Research conducted by Pathologist, Dr. Sydney Warren, has aided the development of a treatment for the condition since October 2032.

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I estimated her at thirteen years of age. She was a lean, gaunt, spindle of a girl. Her hair fanned out over the edge of the examination table, a swaying field of marigold. It had muddied in the infection process, patches at her roots were sprouting silver; light freckles across her cheeks, nose and forehead removed by sparse splotches of lost pigment. I cupped her face, my latex glove squeaking against the surface of her cheek. Her skin was raised and chalky. I stroked the apple with my thumb and noticed a substance coating my fingertips, gritty and white like baking soda. An ache blossomed in my chest.

I stuck my thumb and index finger either side of her eyelid and spread them apart. Her pupils were dilated with a hazy black stripe running across the middle. I reached across her blanketed body and patted the edge for my flashlight. Clicking it on, I pointed it at her iris. They clouded over and her sclera had small grey lines blooming out of the corners. Her lips were cracked, evidence of deep gashes reopened time again, crusted over. *Dehydrated for an extended period of time.* Blood dried in the corners of her mouth, it was subtle, but it crumbled down her chin. *Potential gum disease?* Humming to myself, I separated her top and bottom jaw. It didn't take much for it to open as I parted it with two fingers.

Swallowing my nausea, the surgical spirit in the air was replaced by an odour of rotten eggs and plaque build-up. I hooked



my finger under my pale-blue surgical mask and lifted it to cover the bottom-half of my face; a pair of flimsy plastic goggles followed in suit. I flashed the light into her throat; and was met by a pool of viscous liquid sloshing around her uvula. It was stagnant, so much so that I could see the reluctance in the furrow of my brows in the reflection. The light bounced off it, the tissue trauma revealing that around eight teeth had been yanked out by, *pliers*.

My body convulsed for half a second after my mind conjured the scene. I blinked it away with a rough shake of my head, a crack filled my ears with the sudden jolt. I rolled my head to the left, stretching out as I made a sound similar to a shower turning on. Her tongue caught my attention, I reached for a wooden ice-lolly stick and pushed it down into the bottom of her mouth. Coils were growing out of her taste buds. I caught one with the rounded edge, twirling it around. It wrapped around the stick five times before it came out, a hair follicle on the end. *I haven't seen this before.* Taking a pair of tweezers and a few cotton buds, I began to collect samples. Swabbing the inside of her cheeks, along her gums and remaining teeth; I tweezed out some more coils and placed them into separate plastic vials for examination. Taking a cotton bud behind her ears, I noticed patches of discolouration dotting down the back of her neck. Congregated spots and lines that had faded with time. *Ruptured blood vessels.*

I stepped back for a minute and pulled down my surgical face mask as I stared at her form. I could only imagine the horrors she must have endured. Frozen with the darkest reaches of my mind, I gulped down the lump in my throat to ready myself as I tugged at the blanket shielding the rest of her body.

I could see where the Derma Noir had begun its dictatorship. Grey splotches showing in between her fingers and from her knee-

caps to her toes were colourless. I manoeuvred to the far end of the table, the lamplight caught on the silver surface. A thick dent was in the thin skin of her ankles, along with a winded pattern. It crossed over a few times, like a braid, the grooves digging deep. *Rope*. She was all bones. *Malnourishment*. I tensed my grip on the table. *Poor girl*.

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The suction from the seal of the door broke my intense stare and a tall figure entered in some scrubs. Raising my eyebrows, I stretched the tension from my face as the door swung closed and the assistant approached me. ‘She seemed to have been bound,’ he murmured, placing a scalpel on the drainage grid. Apprehensive at his arrival, I fluttered my gaze between them, my weight shifting from foot to foot.

‘From her ankles.’ Replying to his observation, confusion followed as to how he had managed to see her before I did. Doctor Harman mentioned my assistant when I caught him before coming here... Jordan? Joseph? Something along those lines. I searched for a name tag, not a lanyard or pin in sight, but familiarity hit me. The hospital was difficult to navigate, I must have passed him in the halls after I got myself lost post arrival. Blonde, tall, intimidating and as pretty as someone could be standing over a body. Aftershave wafted with his movements, the face of an ex-partner flashing in my mind. Oh yeah, that happened earlier. I suppose it *was* cheap and accessible, just like the ex. ‘Where did they find her?’ I haven’t been given many details, the tween being a Jane Doe made it harder to determine where she came from and what happened to activate Derma Noir. But the image was getting clearer.

‘Recovered along the riverbank by Silver Street.’ I’m not from the town, but I used that street to get here. The river was rampant and had eroded away the bed, leaving a sliver of a ledge. ‘Washed up in the early hours of this morning.’ I’m surprised that anyone could wash up there, even a tiny thing like her. So far, she was a Jane Doe. It was shared across social media platforms in an instant, but not a single person had come forward. I slid my hands under her back as the assistant brought her right ankle over her left. Together, we rolled her onto her side as though she was glass.

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Little stumps of cartilage protruded out of her back, a total of sixteen. All different shapes and sizes in a variety of grey. I held my hand out and he handed me the scalpel. Pressing the blade into the nubbin, it retracted. *What the fuck?* With shaky hands, I scraped a chunk of skin cells from a nub at the top of her spine and dropped it into a vial. Looking up at Jordan-Joseph, his face was pale, and his mouth was stuck in the tiniest ‘o’ shape. *Mutation.* It flared in the back of my brain, but without a word, I readied myself to move her. Her DNA was in the process of being tested, bloods were sent upstairs as soon as she arrived. They might not find her but perhaps a relative and then more answers will follow.

‘Do you recognise her?’ In my defence, the town of Hudderton was small. Jordan-Joseph’s hands faltered in his excursion in parting her ankles, but he shook his head. I washed over her skin with a cloth soaked in alcohol solution, her abdomen, chest and arms. Dragging the sterilised blade from her collarbone to her abdomen, the skin folded open, curling over like a silk scarf.

The assistant leered over my shoulder, coffee-breath in my

ear. I barged him a few inches back. That foul odour hit me for the second time, different from the first. *Worse*. Like moulded beef marinated in petrol and cheap honey-barbeque sauce; sour and festered.

‘What the fuck?’ There was dense crystallised blood coating her ribcage, in which three were cracked and crumbled under my touch. Beneath, a thick sludge where her organs should be. *It ate her*. Unable to prevent saliva from pooling my mouth, my temperature shot up as my forehead began to drip; I ripped the mask from my face and spewed the steak bake I had for lunch into the drainage grid. Bracing my body up against the sink, my knees drooped to the floor. A plastic cup of water appeared along with a light breeze, Jordan-Joseph had my notes in hand and was fanning me.

‘What happened to her?’ The words rang through the room, hitching a ride on that putrid aroma. I swallowed the lukewarm liquid, not giving myself air to breathe and when I pulled away, my chest was heaving. Breathless, I brought myself to my feet, ignoring his outstretched hand. I hooked the loops of a new surgical mask around my ears and gave myself a moment of recovery. Acetic gravy on my breath, retching, I spun around and reached into her open chest cavity. Gathering the gunge into my hands. Jaw clenched. Every movement offered an audible squelch like wading through a muddy field.

Jordan-Joseph held out the sample trays for me as I picked up the substance and sliced small pieces of it off. It oozed from my fingers into the vials, clinging on to my gloves like melted ganache. His arms were stretched as far as he could get them; his hands trembled.

I switched my gloves out and fetched some cotton from under the sink as the assistant took the tray off to the side, clearing the

space for her embalming. I gazed down into the whirlpool at the back of her throat, as I rolled chunks of cotton into mismatched balls. Something in the depths thrashed like a fly in a tape-trap. *Something alive.* Casting the cotton to the side, I dragged my sleeves up to my elbows and without a second thought, reached for it. The tip of my finger scraped the surface of the gunk, it was –

Her jaw clamped shut. *Fuck.*

Panic travelled through me, the snap of her teeth echoing in my brain as a scared grunt left my throat. *Fuck.* I tugged. Vice-like, her teeth sat in the crevices of my knuckles; I tugged again, playing tug-of-war with my hand. Excruciating pain shot up my arm. Combining together, my blood displaced the fluid until it spilled down her chin, thicker, warmer. She bit through me like a mozzarella stick, like nothing, inhumane sobs clawed their way out of my throat. The tendons in my fingers pulled thin, like bacon fat. I was growling in between pants of terror, tugging and tugging –

I fell back. Head bouncing against the floor, my brain like the middle of an 8-ball. I watched as a layer squirted over every surface, ceiling and floor. Her greying body soaked in a layer of deep red. She stripped the top half of my fingers down to the bone. Static filled my ears. My eyesight blurred.

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Millions of thoughts and memories bombarded me, a highlight reel of the worst moments of my life. A desolated hole tore opens within my chest, devouring my soul. It felt endless. *Jordan-Joseph.* I flipped over onto my stomach, cradling my amputated fingers as I fought gravity to crawl to the door. I couldn't project my voice.

My knees kept sliding in opposite directions. *I'm going to die.* Oxygen struggled to enter my lungs; the room became a hazier beacon of white. I lost my balance, both of my arms flung out to catch me when I hit the floor, a grim snap coming from my collarbone. *Please, I'm going to die.* A long figure hovered above me, their head cocked to the side as my vision faded. Choking for help, my motivation died with the slowing of my heart. *Please.*

*One.*

*Two.*

*Three.*

Each beat. *Four.* Pulsing with exhilaration. *Five.* Colours squirmed and twisted like smoke; they bled together like watercolour in the rain. *Six.* A smile tried to form on my face, but the muscles were haggard. I relaxed; my body melted into the surface beneath me. A sharp discomfort – no, *hunger* – broke the serendipity that coddled me. My spine clicked as I shot upright. The lab looked like a 90s music video, neon and psychedelic. And the smell, oh everything was so *sweet*. Like walking past a perfumer's in summer. Ambrosia incarnates.

My ankle rolled as I clambered to my feet, my body slammed

into something cold and hard. It winded the air from my lungs. A wheeze escaped me. I leverage my hand to pull myself up, my groans and grunts like a choir. I wiggled my fingertips to grab the soft piece of linen on the side and realised that I was missing some phalanges. Brushing the open wound against the cool metal, a deep scream left my mouth. I took the linen between my teeth, wrapped it around my hand until I had a cocoon collecting the last pint of blood in my body. I slapped my other hand against the floor and vaulted my body forward, using my grip to drag myself along. My neck snapped in the direction of a swishing noise. Too sharp and too sudden.

Tall. Hulking. A figure approached me. Fear and anger washed over me, goosebumps pricking up over every inch of my skin. I felt feeble, like a bunny with its foot caught. Unable to flee, I slapped my hand against the floor again, a burst of energy fuelled by the fight and flight kicking in. My stomach moaned. *Hungry*. A vague yet familiar voice sliced through the room.

‘Doctor...’ *So hungry*. I lunged for him, grasping his ankle and sunk my teeth into it. It was like a fresh plum. The taste, comparable to honey coated popcorn. His pleas were distant whispers as I pulled him to the floor. I climbed his body and went for his neck. Tearing him apart, layer by layer. Sucking on his oesophagus, then cleaning out his intestines. *A buffet*. I grabbed a clump of his hair in my fist and slammed his head into the floor. Over and over. *Something smelt incredible*. Again and again, until his skull cracked in two. I slurped his cerebrospinal fluid from his eye socket, and then shovelled fistfuls of his soft gelatine into my mouth. My teeth cut right through it; it melted on my tongue. The texture was heaven. The taste, I groaned, even better. But the more I consumed, the hunger grew painful, gnawing away at my abdomen.

*I wanted more.*

High-pitched screams were followed by a red flashing alarm that filled the hall. A bright light welcomed me. *I needed more.* A beautiful tune drifted on the wind, the sun winked above the door frame, a laugh bubbled through the bits of flesh that I spat on to the floor as I manoeuvred towards the end of the corridor. *I knew just where to get it.*



# A Collection of Poetry

Kiran Wade

Kiran Wade is a disabled, transgender poet, performer and artist from Yorkshire. He is currently finishing his undergraduate degree in Creative Writing at the University of Lincoln. His work has found its way to far reaching places including, the Edinburgh Fringe, Hampton Court and a range of anthologies.

## **Boyhood**

Three heads in a row pretend to sleep,  
pretend in the same way five-year-olds  
pretend to be dinosaurs.

It is now 6:02 a.m.  
on a Wednesday.

My first sleepover wasn't what I had imagined,  
the result of shots, lost door keys, and early rehearsals  
in university halls.

She is wearing my clothes.  
He is using my blankets.  
At least I get my bed.

A show-and-tell of a new love interest,  
his Instagram highlights audition tapes.  
A hopeful goodnight in the darkness,  
knocked to the side by a sarcastic lullaby.  
Giggles.

For a while now,  
I have been searching for a childhood I never had.  
I set an alarm to that song from Drag Race we all like  
and wonder if this is it.  
Somewhere within this twenty-year-old man falling asleep  
is a seven-year-old girl, jealous, keeping me awake.

Her bedtime was two years ago  
but I don't think she will ever relent.

## **A Great Day**

The last time I tried to kill myself, it was a Saturday, the weather watched on with that mid-summer smile. It gave me heat and a breeze that outlasted blue skies, so even at 9 p.m., the polo shirt I was wearing was fine. After 40 minutes on the train tracks, I wasn't cold. Still, after that long, my tears hadn't quite wiped away the rainbows on my cheeks from a pride full of *glad you're heres*. I don't know where I left the inflatable microphone from karaoke with all my friends, maybe at Maccies. I didn't eat anything; I was too busy typing messages never sent to people who picked up as soon as a stranger intervened. I argued with him for a while, ear-phones playing country and Lady Gaga; it's funny how indecisive you get when you think something is gonna be the last thing you hear. Even my skin felt temporary. **Refusing, refusing, refusing, agreeing** to move. The only thing that mattered to me was focusing my mind on one last nice thing, my morbid meditation. Later, I posted pics from pride. A great day, I said.

## Debris

I have a pile of confetti in my room,  
it sits at the corner of my desk,  
most of the time with no meaning.  
Long burnt ashes of  
dead stars and flightless owls.  
Wings broken at sunsets,  
midnights and 3 a.m.'s that can never be revisited.

I knock something off its resting place  
every now and then,  
dig up a graveyard,  
feel the touch of a corpse that resembles me.  
Hand reaching through headstones,  
stone strangers that crumble at sunrise.  
Mud stains my skin the way the lights failed to.

The confetti nestles between the ground and my shoes.  
The floor isn't as sticky as it once was.  
I pray the paper clings to me.



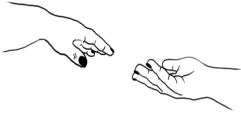
Thank you for reading this far!  
We'll assume that means you had a pleasant experience.

For your time, and for your support, thank you.  
Writing isn't possible without readers.

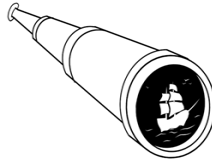
Onto the next one!



# Illustrators



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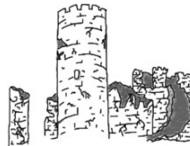


Di Brown

Daisy Hall



Eleanor Hall



Kiran Wade



If there is one constant between all worlds, it's the end. Whether that be the end of a life, or the end of a tale, all things conclude. From the deepest trenches of one's own mind to your very own back garden, Murmurations is a collaborative anthology full of madness, magic and misery.



## WE WISH YOU A WONDERFUL TIME IN OUR WORLDS

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