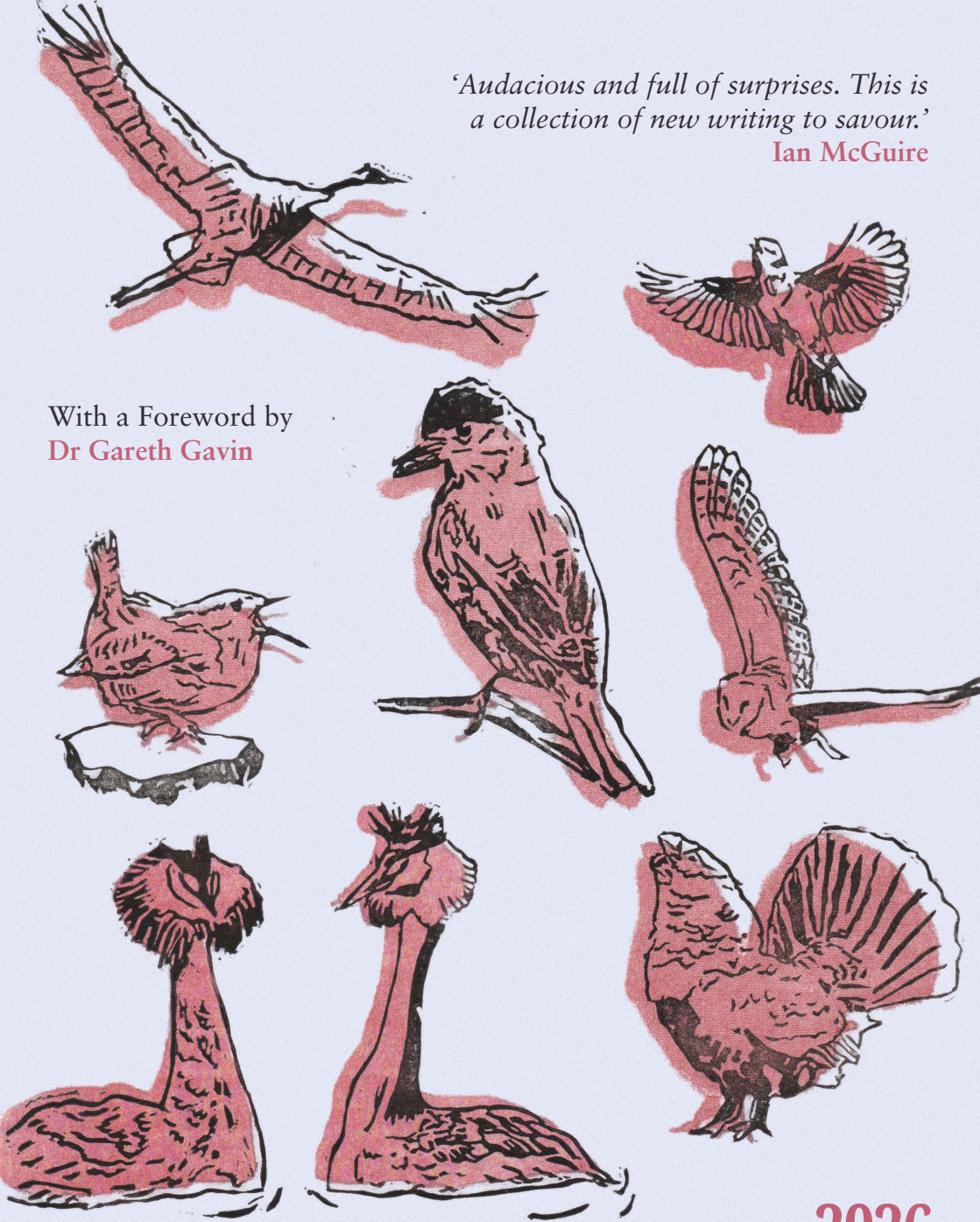


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a collection of new writing to savour.'*

Ian McGuire

With a Foreword by
Dr Gareth Gavin



2026

THE MANCHESTER ANTHOLOGY

**THE
MANCHESTER ANTHOLOGY
2026**

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FOREWORD

I've often found encouragement in Patricia Highsmith's characteristically unsentimental yet generous advice that a writer 'should have the feeling... that there are more ideas where that one came from, more strength where the first strength came from, and that you are inexhaustible as long as you are alive'. Such an outlook is not to be taken for granted, but Highsmith is unsurprisingly impatient when it comes to excuses. The cultivation of tenacity, she immediately suggests – as if she has already anticipated her reader's protests – is part of the difficulty and the discipline of writing: it 'requires an optimistic turn of mind, to say the least, and if you don't have it by nature, it has to be created artificially. You have to talk yourself into it sometimes'.¹ Somehow that 'you have to' manages to have the tone of both consolation and admonishment. It's an insistence that carries within it the contemplation of the opposite of optimism.

Highsmith's *Plotting and Writing Suspense Fiction*, from where this advice is taken, is overtly designed to instruct writers in the mechanics of Highsmith's favoured genre. But the book as it unfolds is never simply about technique in the narrow sense. Or rather, it is completely about technique, to the extent that 'technique' also references a writer's wider approach to the material they intend to manipulate. Writing is never not a form of manipulation for Highsmith, but the central lesson of *Plotting* is that a writer must learn how to train their intuitions and instincts. Hence she emphasises that being able to recognise a good idea for a piece of writing is just as important as having one. She repeatedly seeks to persuade us of a reader's willingness to entertain implausibility, but only to the extent that we know how to exert control over our own indulgences: 'Stretch the reader's sense of credulity, his sense of logic, to the utmost – it is quite elastic – but don't snap it'.²

My favourite passages in the book, though, are those that digress into vignettes that give us a glimpse of Highsmith's habits and rituals. 'After opening my post [...],' she tells us, "I indulge in a few minutes of anguish and muted screams, then devote the next hour or more, if necessary, to tackling the mess. When I have satisfied myself that I have done the best I can by letter and telephone, I stand up from my desk and try to pretend I am not me [...]'³ Only then is she able to work. These little impressions of Highsmith's patterns, her writerly rhythms and idiosyncrasies, are regularly interwoven with her advice about structure, setting and character. The cumulative suggestion is that they are inseparable from it. Though it does so without necessarily invoking the personal, the collective creative writing workshop delivers a similar lesson: that technique is both the acquisition of craft and an attitude towards process. It is in the workshop that writers expose their own processes for scrutiny – that's partly the risk of them.

The writing exhibited in this Anthology is brilliantly polished, but every piece is also testament to the development of its writer's process. Following Highsmith we might formulate process as every and any step taken towards the completion of a piece of writing, every activity that readies us for writing, every decision, every carefully considered piece of feedback, every discarded phrase or sentence, every redraft. But process is also a name for the way the experience of those steps continually fashions a writer's ability to harness the relationship between technique and intuition, discipline and creativity. In that sense the writing in these pages demonstrates both achievement in the sense of inspiration already skilfully executed and promise in the sense of something continuous and ongoing. There are so many ideas here – a keepsake box containing only 'dangerous things'; a potentially inauspicious haircut in a salon in a side alley, the walls 'covered in posters of Hong Kong celebrities from the 90s'; 'plants seeding / themselves silly' watched over by 'parkless kids' – and there are certainly more where those ones came from.

As our MA writers come to the end of their year (or two years) with us, I'll finish by invoking Highsmith's infamous New Year's Eve Toast, which always reads to me a like an excellent incantation for any writer: 'to all the devils, lusts, passions, greeds, envies, loves, hates, strange desires, enemies ghostly and real, the army of memories, with which I do battle — may

they never give me peace. (New Year's Eve, 1947)'. But I'll also add to this sentiment her accompanying certainty that the kind of strong writing that comes from such battles confers its own kind of fortitude: 'in its way,' she says at the conclusion of *Plotting*, 'the writing of the book will protect you from all kinds of emotional blows, of a destructive kind, which otherwise might wound and distract'.⁴

Dr Gareth Gavin, July 2026

¹ Patricia Highsmith, *Plotting and Writing Suspense Fiction* (Sphere, 2015), p. 12. First published by Poplar Press in 1983.

² Highsmith, *Plotting*, p. 51.

³ Highsmith, *Plotting*, p. 44

⁴ Highsmith, *Plotting*, p. 126.



SHORT STORIES

Devarya Singhania

HOT SHIT

Argyle's bathroom door was right in front of me. I snuck in.

Catching my breath, I held my chest.

John, my cameraman, had warned me not to do this.

"Don't test your luck," he said, as he saw me rush towards the door. "You're gonna get arrested."

"Fuck it," I replied. "When'll I get another chance?"

My left hand was still holding the doorknob. All of its twenty-four karat diamond encasings. I glided my thumb over them, counting each stone. Five? No, six. Five-and-a-half, let's say.

I should've jammed the doorknob out. Would've fetched me millions. Could've carried some of his DNA back too.

Mom would've hated that.

But hey. Fuck you, mom. Had such an issue with your Princeton pre-law daughter becoming a celebrity journalist, didn't you? Who's laughing now?

My heartbeat got quicker, and I took two deep breaths to bring myself back.

Holy shit, I whispered to myself. I stared at the door, and smiled widely. Finally.

Usually, whenever a celebrity darted off to their "zen room" in the middle of our interviews, they were having a panic attack. Or their PAs were shouting at them for some of the answers they'd given.

We weren't going to edit the answers out, anyway.

Our magazine, despite being tenth out of fifteen in terms of prestige within Hollywood, had a strict no re-shoot policy. Once you say your shit, own it.

Argyle didn't tell us why he darted off, either. How mysterious. Plus, I rarely interviewed the male leads. Argyle was an exception—I had to persist against my editor's wishes, but being the superfan I was, she agreed.

She was convinced I would mess this interview up. Thought I'd give in if Argyle lied—but he wouldn't lie! So what if he was my sugar-boo? A certified hottie? I can resist.

My editor even promised that if the interview went well, she'd promote me to a Senior Correspondent. That way, I'd be able to interview all the leads going forward.

Easy-peasy, I told her.

This would also be Argyle's last interview. He'd decided to retire after the release of *Nation's Boys II: Revenge of the Mothers*.

In the media he said it was because he "couldn't contribute to the craft any longer." But a few minutes before I entered his bathroom, off-camera (on special request), he told me he couldn't spend any more money or time on med-spa induced cosmetic procedures.

I wanted to ask him why. Give me more of that sexy face. More of those abs. I'll drink your sweat.

If Sydney Sweeney can sell her bathwater to no one's objection, surely you could give me some of your bodily fluids. No one needs to know.

I should've told him.

By the time I realised I'd been staring into his blue eyes, with my face open and saliva nearly drooling out, he snapped his fingers and asked us to resume the interview.

I'd asked him what the sequel was doing differently than the first part a bit before he darted off.

"What was suddenly *so good* about mothers that you needed an action-comedy dedicated to them?"

It came out snarkier than I wanted.

Mine was a deviant, I wanted to add, but we weren't allowed to share any information about ourselves during the interview. Else I'd even given him my phone number, and an AI-generated semi-nude. He was so old, no way he'd be able to tell. Everyone in Hollywood looked pretty much AI-generated with their surgeries anyway.

Not my Argy-boo, though.

"You know," he said, putting his left hand in his pocket, and the right

one behind his head. His classic *softboy pose* from the first movie. Eat me.

"Mothers are the real heroes," he went on. "We all should know that. In the first one, my character saved his mother from succumbing to body dysmorphia. In this one, let's just say, he isn't the hero."

You're always the hero, I thought. What charm, what poise, oh God I want to eat you.

"Would you say your mother is your biggest inspiration?" I said.

"I think for me," he paused. "All mothers are my inspiration. Mothers as a concept."

"Interesting," I smiled, trying not to stick my tongue out and lick his symmetrical, shiny white teeth.

He'd been spotted outside an LA dentistry med-spa a few weeks ago. We didn't address it during the interview, but I wanted to commend him. Do whatever it takes, boo, I thought, to keep those teeth like that.

"What specifically about them do you find inspiring?" I added.

"Hold on," he said, asking John to lower the camera. "Gonna be back in a jiffy."

I'll wait for you. Forever. Every minute that it irks my mother.

My thumb got stubbed by a diamond, and I snapped back. Chop-chop.

I let go of the handle, and smiled. I stretched my cheeks so wide they cramped. I knew I only had ten minutes. Maybe a bit more if Argyle's PA was stricter than average. Time to get to work.

I'd thought about doing this for the last seven interviews. Wanted to know what these people hid in their most private places. A secret just for me. I'd even maladaptively daydreamed the whole thing.

But no one was as special as Argy-pookie. My childhood crush.

So what if I was thirteen then, and he was twenty-eight? So what if he was sixty now? He'd done enough botox to look thirty.

I took a few sniffs. Beautiful. The air was filled with lavenders, some tangerine essence oils and even trickles of cigarette ash. *Definitely* not like other guys.

I took a big sniff again. How gorgeous this boy was that even his shit-smell could be placed in a Lululemon store.

The commode was empty. The water inside, clear as crystal. Give that in a glass to starving children, and they'd bless your soul. Could be good PR,

actually, if our magazine ever went down the drain.

I bent down and took a sniff of the water, and stood up. I wanted to eat this man. Not in an Armie Hammer way but just shove my face inside his. Somehow.

The mirror on top of the sink was broken. It didn't look punched. It was just missing the middle half. Maybe it'd been installed that way. I could only see my face, and bit of my lower chest.

Is this the place he stared at himself? Admiring that white stubble that traced his seamless jawline?

He'd gotten a "bone smashing" procedure from a med-spa, months ago, he'd said, when talking about his retirement plans. Cut me with your face, I wanted to reply.

I don't know why'd he share such an intimate detail with me? Did he like me? Most celebs were so reserved usually, you couldn't even get them to talk about their favourite fruit. Maybe he did like me. I quivered down there thinking about it.

Finally reaping what I sowed in my teen age.

On the weekends his show would come on the Indian Disney channel at home, around eight-nine in the morning, I'd spring myself awake and switch on the TV. It didn't matter if I underslept. I'd give anything for his spiky-blond hair, lean, veiny physique in a vest and denim-shorts, as he sang with his boy-band.

Mom hated me watching it.

"This is obscene," she'd say, as Argyle's character french-kissed his on-screen brunette girlfriend into oblivion. "These western shows are spoiling you!"

His was the only show uncensored in the Indian kids network. For reasons I never found out.

Mom would switch off the TV, and run away with the remote. I'd have to sneak it out again, around two-three at night, set an alarm for eight, and watch as Argyle's tongue jammed the short girl. How I wished it'd be me.

Mom would go on mumbling about some "unrealistic whitewashed conditioning" that these shows were doing to my mind every time I was caught, but she just hadn't known a face like Argyle's. Wasn't my fault she

grew up in a time without TV and a moustache-y fat man like dad.

I sighed, and inched closer to his mirror.

Fuck you, mom, I said out loud, hoping she'd hear me all the way in Delhi. Try and stop me.

I smooched the top half of the mirror. Twice, thrice. Sixfold even. I switched on the tap and gurgled some water. Once more saliva developed, I smooched the mirror again. I stopped counting.

If this is where his shaving cream splattered, because he was flimsy cleaning up, let me eat the residue. If this is where the drops of his pee-stained hands landed, before he washed them, let them enter me.

My lips went numb after a few minutes, and my tongue slipped out the edges.

I shook my head.

Better get a move on. Argyle would be out any minute.

I snuck a quick glance at the mirror, my spit drooling down onto the bottom half, some onto the tap, and giggled.

If Argyle saw this, would he kiss me? Would his forehead that doesn't move now, because those med-spas injected all the world's saline, and nose that mimics the shape of a sparrow's cute beak, turn and meet my face wrinkled from stress?

I wanted to smooch it again. Say out loud: *look at me now, mom.*

Didn't have a lot of time left, so I held myself back.

"How much longer?" John knocked. "What the fuck are you even doing inside?"

"Had to use the washroom," I replied, my heartbeat rising up every minute. "Urgent lady stuff you wouldn't understand."

"They have guestrooms for us, you know?" his voice rose, and I could sense him getting nervous too. "If he knows you did this, we're both fucked. And so are our jobs."

"Don't worry," I replied, gripping the diamond-doorknob. Pain was supposed to distract from anxiety, someone who acted with Gwyneth Paltrow had told me. "Be out in a minute."

I turned to the commode. How sad it must've been, Argyle, a few hours before the segment, shitting his life there. Or was it magnificent? His butt sunk into the white marble of the thing. It was pristinely clean now.

How did he feel after a good shit? How well did he wipe his ass?

Should I lick it, I wondered. Fans do all sorts of crazy shit, right? This way I'd have something of his with me. Forever. Something no one would ever take away from me.

Then I can really say *fuck you, mom*.

I inched and lifted the seat. There was a line of a dark-yellow stain. Ochre.

Silly goose Argyle. You're supposed to clean the seat fully, dummy! You thought I wouldn't look, did you? Guess this makes me your biggest fan officially!

The stain traced the square of the rim in parts. It occurred around the back edges, disappeared in the middle and resumed in the front. When I looked at the bottom of the seat, there were dark brown clunks hanging around the edges. I nearly extended my tongue out, but John knocked again.

"Hey!" he said. "I'm pretty sure they're almost done. I can barely hear them anymore."

The seat slipped, and some of the stain splattered on my white shirt.

Shit. Shit, shit.

"Yup," I yelled to John. "Coming out."

I grabbed all of the toilet paper, switched on the tap, and soiled it. I kept rubbing it on my shirt, over-and-over, but the cocoa line on my shirt remained. It was stuck to my stomach now. The stain, drying, and seeping into my skin.

Yuck, I said, and retched. The fuck was I doing? I was about to lick this sixty-year old buffoon's feces!

The toilet paper splattered across the bathroom floor. I switched off the tap, and tried shoving the paper into the commode. I stuffed it all in, and tried flushing. It clogged. I pressed the flush again, and again, but the water began to rise. The paper was spilled across the commode, until the door.

I jumped back, panting.

I turned to the top mirror. Sweat perspired from my forehead until my shoulders. My hair, disheveled. It was in no shape to be on camera. It'd need another hour to settle down, at least.

Fuck.

I stared at the mirror as John knocked. My smooch stains were still there. My shirt was soaking wet—I couldn't even use it to wipe it. It'd only lead to more water, and more stains. I tried catching my breath, but John kept knocking on the door. Dear God, please help me.

I took a few deep breaths. And a few more.

Is this what you wanted, mom? Happy now?

"They've literally opened the door!" John said with two big thumps.

You win, mom, I said, panting. Hear me and end this nightmare.

I took one final breath. I punched the top mirror. The blood of my fingers dripped down in the same manner as my saliva from before.

I shook my hands, and tiny specks of my blood spread across his bathroom, as the toilet began to overflow.

Faith Hughes

POSTERS

How long are we going to watch. Sadie asked.

Until it happens. Finn replied.

They were sat on a cold steel bench in the middle of an impending thunderstorm. Or just a quick shower. The weather forecast had been very unsure. But Sadie liked to think she had a second sense for these things, and her second sense was telling her it was an impending thunderstorm. It had been too hot recently. That's how things worked. It goes up and so it comes back down. This drizzle was clearly proof- it was all about to break. Any moment now. Or it was just a passing shower, no way to know. Whatever it was, the wind was up and rapping Sadie's hair into her eyes and her mouth and her nose. Finn had told her to tie it up, but she hadn't. She'd just washed it, it looked good. It would look better windswept. It always looked better windswept. She intended to go to work later and show up and be showered with compliments on her hair. Which would happen, if she kept it down and if the thunderstorm didn't break. Or if it didn't break while she was sat on the bench. Or if it was quick enough. She would be fine. That was her plan.

Finn's plan involved watching the posters.

His dark eyes were unmoving, and his broken leg propped atop his rucksack. Sat to attention like he could still jump into action. He was the least subtle man Sadie had ever met.

Sadie fidgeted in the seat. Her arse was getting numb.

They were squished into one side of the bench that was adjacent to the bus-stop, a little into the concrete square at the edge of the high-street. It had an armrest bolted in the middle which was digging into Sadie's side. The paint on the bench was peeling, but the armrest was pristine. Sadie

had noticed it a few months back, bolted on by the council. Intelligent design, Sadie thought, now the homeless have no choice but to sleep on the floor. The empathy of the state astounded her. She shifted a little to the left and further into Finn's space. His leg might have been broken but he was still hogging the bench. He didn't move.

Did we have to do it today. The wind was bracing and Sadie's hair was back in her mouth.

Finn didn't answer. He was watching.

Sadie tracked Finn's line of sight to a bald white guy strutting up to the bus-stop in his best joggers. Is it him? Sadie asked.

No. I don't know. It could be. Finn studied the man from his bald head to his scuffed air force ones. Sadie studied him too, in lieu of anything else to do.

His joggers were worn. His hoodie was baggy and old. He was walking with a cocky little swing to his step. He looked the type.

He looks the type, Sadie offered.

Finn would have rolled his eyes if he wasn't committed to staring. You're profiling.

No, I'm not. I'm making a judgement based on appearance.

That's textbook profiling.

What are you doing if you're not profiling.

I'm watching.

But why are you watching *him* in particular.

Because he's on the move.

On the move suspiciously?

No. Just on the move.

Finn raised his phone and took a photo. It wasn't subtle. If anyone had been sat at another bench watching them, they would have caught it immediately. Sadie stared around but there was no one. At least no one as obvious. The street was quiet this time of day, except for the bald man at the stop, the two odd people crammed into one side of a bench, and a kid circling the high street on his bike.

The bald man stuck his arm out, the bus pulled into the stop, and he was on the move again. Moments later the bus-stop was empty and the posters were unharmed. Finn leaned back and shook his head.

It wasn't him.

Sadie said nothing. She was thinking over and over about getting up and going home. Home would be warm, home would be dry, home would be a much better place to wait for her shift tonight. Instead, she was watching the posters.

It was usually the expectation that students and young activists could poster whatever they liked along the bus-route headed towards the university. It was fair space for drama shows, student elections, club nights, open dialogues, radio shows, calls to action, paint and sip nights, journalling clubs, intros to feminisms, fundraisers, political revolutions, demands as towards the overthrow of the capitalist world order, and debut musicals. But lately the bus-stop near Sadie's flat had been struck by a disaster. Nothing was staying up. She would leave for uni in the morning and read the calls to action and the urges for organisation and the invitations for considerations then get home after work and the posters would be gone. Sometimes a ghost of them would remain, the jagged outline of sellotape trapped paper. Spectres of a different world. But usually they were all gone. Torn to pieces. Drifting in the gutter.

It was unthinkable.

For the past 3 years the posters were a fact of life. You could find yourself for months at a time forgetting what a bus-stop was supposed to look like. Forgetting they were transparent. That you were supposed to see the bus coming.

Sadie had always taken comfort in knowing someone was doing the activism out there. It made her much more comfortable to just get on with her own life. Someone else was putting up the good fight, else they wouldn't be putting up the posters. Now though? She wasn't so sure. Without the posters how was she meant to know what was going on? What protests and public demonstrations was she meant to mark in her calendar and watch unfold on social media?

Earlier that day she had mentioned her distress at the posters' removal to Finn, and he was very intrigued.

We should catch them in the act. Finn had said. This was back when they were inside and warm in Finn's flat. He was sat at his kitchen table, broken leg resting up on a second chair.

The act of what? Sadie had asked.

Sadie had popped round to check on him- she had been hoping to

make it brief (this was when she was hoping for a day inside) but he was in such a pitiful state she had roped herself into looking after him. She was heating up a frozen block of soup on Finn's stove and hadn't really been listening to her own rant about the posters. Sometimes she would speak just to fill the space, rant and see where her words took her. It often put her in dangerous and strange positions, defending points she barely understood.

The act of tearing down the posters! Finn grabbed at his crutches and one of them slipped through his fingers and clattered to the kitchen floor.

Sadie turned from her vigil over the pot of frozen soup. It was starting to melt down at the edges. What good will that do? She asked.

We need to know our enemy if we plan to do anything about them. Finn leaned forwards as far as he could and swiped at the fallen clutch.

What are we going to do about them? Sadie reached down and grabbed the crutch and handed it to Finn. I don't even put the posters up.

Its praxis Sadie. We can't just talk about this stuff. You're upset the posters are being torn down, right?

I suppose. A little. Yes.

Then we have to do something. It's our duty.

But why is it my duty? Sadie thought. She turned back to the soup that was now bubbling on the pot. Can we eat first?

Finn didn't answer her. He hopped up on his crutches and hobbled out the room to gather his things to stake out the bus stop. Sadie stared at the door listlessly and turned back to the soup, it was burnt against the bottom of the pan. She turned the heat off and tipped it in the bin.

Back on the bench Sadie swore she felt spots of rain. She flipped her hood up, smothering her windswept hair. It's raining, she said rather pointlessly.

It's not meant to rain. Finn also threw his hood up.

Well, it is isn't it. Sadie gestured at his leg brace. Can you get that wet?

Finn shrugged. It can get a little damp. It's probably just passing. Finn zipped up his coat.

I'm sure it's not. Sadie zipped her coat up too. It was a size or so too small for her which left her feeling suffocated. She half unzipped it.

We could do this another day.

Finn looked to Sadie quizzically. Why would we do this another day?

The weather conditions could be better. And I don't think whoever tears down posters, is going to care all that much about these ones.

Finn didn't answer her. Someone had caught his attention. An older woman was standing at the bus stop with her shopping bags and reading the posters or the bus times, it was hard to tell from this angle.

Sadie may have been profiling again but this didn't seem like their poster hating culprit. Maybe they won't care about these posters. She repeated.

Finn didn't answer her but that was fine. She was pretty sure she was right. The posters up today asked *Can Animals Consent To Capitalism?* Which was the sort of vegan liberation stuff that made Sadie roll her eyes. Obviously, the answer was no. Animals couldn't consent to capitalism, but they also ate their own shit. Their opinions weren't really valuable.

I just think that these posters aren't that important. The fash tearing the others down might just ignore them. Sometimes band posters stay up a little longer you know.

Finn snapped a picture of the woman and her shopping bags. He was silent so Sadie continued. I mean we don't really need to defend this point do we? There's people dying out there. Starving. Isn't it a bit of a privilege to sit and say "hey look at me I'm choosing not to eat".

The bus had been and gone, leaving the stop empty again. Finn turned to look at Sadie. It's not privilege to care about others. There are cost effective ways to cut out meat.

Meat subs are like twice the price.

Buy vegetables then.

I do buy vegetables. I'm just saying that there's people who aren't afforded the luxury of time to prepare veg based meals.

So?

So is this a point really worth debating? There's people starving.

Starving where?

You know... places. Sadie's face flushed, and all of a sudden, she was deeply aware of the joints in her fingers. She clamped her mouth shut and looked away. Finn turned back to his vigil.

The kid on his bike was wheeling past again. She was pretty certain it was school hours. He was the only kid about, yet there he was up and down the high-street on his bike. The rhythmic spiral of the front wheel, spokes merging into a silver blur. Weaving between cars, zipping on and

off the pavement. He passed just by them and caught Sadie looking. She looked away. It was weird to be watching a kid she thought. It was weird to be watching anyone.

She looked at Finn again. He was still staring at the posters, willing someone to tear them down. Sadie had half a mind to go over there and rip them down herself, cut out the middleman. The rain was coming down a little harder now. She looked at Finn's leg brace, she was sure he couldn't get that sort of thing wet. If it was her leg that was broken, she would have been inside. Though she supposed, if it was her then her leg wouldn't have been broken. She didn't have parents who could afford to whisk her skiing for her birthday. Her leg was intact. Unlike Finn's which was shattered in three separate places from catching himself wrong on the descent. He just didn't know how to stop.

A bus had been and gone and the old woman hadn't touched the posters because of course she hadn't. There was now a group of lads by the stop. Finn had tracked them all the way from Kings Pub. Shouting and shoving each other. Drunk under a midafternoon sky. Lucky bastards. One of them, the shortest, was gesticulating at the posters and cackling. Finn was on the edge of his seat. Phone out he snapped more photos. The other lads ignored their short friend and he stopped pointing. The bus pulled into the stop. They all got on. The posters were unharmed.

Finn nodded. They might be back.

Sadie's hood had blown down and her hair was being blown into her mouth again. She picked it out of her lips and asked. What if they don't get torn down today?

They will. Finn was flicking through his photos.

But suppose they don't, suppose we're sat here for nothing. Sadie felt her bruised side twinge in agreement.

They've torn them down every day before.

Just because a thing has happened every day before doesn't mean it will keep happening forever. A large spot of rain clattered into her lap.

It's a strong indicator that it will continue though.

If that was true we'd still be in caves hitting each other with sticks.

Sadie, this was your idea. Finn prodded her with his phone.

Whatever. Sadie turned to watch the kid on his bike wheeling past again. It was funny to think there were kids in the neighbourhood.

Families even. She always took it for granted that this was a young person's area, for students and the recently graduated. There were so many worlds overlapping in one space. It made her dizzy to think like this, to really consider everyone around her as someone as deep as her. Fathomless depths just out of reach.

We can do something else if you want. Finn said. Get a coffee maybe.

Do you want a coffee?

Finn shrugged in a way that made Sadie deflate. Like he was disappointed in her. For not sticking it out in this fruitless task.

Sadie dragged herself up, her legs felt unsteady after sitting so uncomfortably for so long. What do you want?

I can come with you.

Someone has to keep watching. What do you want.

Finn wanted an iced coffee which felt paradoxical in the weather, but Sadie didn't question it. She was going to be accommodating. Prove his disappointment wrong. She'd get the drink and watch the posters for hours if need be. Call off sick from work even, if that's what it would take. She headed down the high street past the national chain café to the local chain café and ordered an iced latte and a flat white.

While she waited, Sadie checked herself out in her phone, rearranged her bangs so they looked normal, then flicked away from her camera before anyone could notice she was checking herself out. Instinctively, she was on Instagram scrolling again until a faraway disaster was all she could scroll through. She put it away and looked out the window instead.

From the café she could make out Finn on the bench. See the bus stop just as clearly. She cursed herself. They could have sat in here the whole time and been warm, comfortable, and totally inconspicuous.

The bus stop was swelling now. People leaving for work. Students leaving for lectures. Finn had his phone out, snapping photos of them all. He looked so visible she realised. His phone outstretched in front of him, it was a wonder someone didn't snatch it off him.

Which is in fact what happened.

The kid on the bike pedalled down the street again right past the bench, swiping the phone from Finn's hands. Finn tried to stand and shout but he had to struggle with his crutches. The kid took a corner and disappeared from sight. The crowd at the bus stop watched but no one moved. Not till

the bus turned up to take them into town.

The barista called Sadie's order, called it again. Sadie collected their drinks. It was really raining when she stepped out of the coffee shop, she zipped her coat up and walked back like she'd seen nothing.

What happened? She asked as she returned to the bench and Finn looking all distraught.

That fucking kid stole my phone!

No way. Did you see where he went?

Cause I chased after him, didn't I? Finn waved his crutches at her.

Well don't be a dick. It was your idea to get coffee. She didn't know why she was pretending to be powerless.

Finn didn't say anything.

Thunder rumbled out across the sky, the rain was lashing the streets. The wind sending it in every direction. Sadie shook herself, she kicked at Finn's rucksack and nodded in the direction of his flat. Let's get inside.

He nodded and started to head off as fast as his crutches would allow. His iced coffee was still in Sadie's hands, the cold burning her fingers. She looked back to the untouched posters, then followed him.

Hours later Sadie returned to the bus-stop. It was after work, past midnight. The storm had been and gone, the streets reeked of wet tarmac and puddles had formed just about everywhere. It was a sodden world. Even before she got to the stop she could tell. The bus stop was clear. Transparent. In the gutter, the ghost of a call to action floated, unheard.

Jacob Broughton-Glerup

ON HOLD

Thank you for calling Sheffield City Council. Our menu options have changed, so please listen carefully.

It is important to mention that all of our calls are recorded for training and monitoring purposes.

I had my phone in one hand, keys in the other, my knee pressing down on the door handle, my shoulder pushed up against the door. Undid the first lock with a gratifying click. Then the second. Key in, a half tilt. Another click. And just like that, the breach. The door swung open. I was in.

For issues relating to 'Council Tax', press 1. For issues relating to 'Bins and Recycling', press 2. For issues relating to Housing, press 3. For all other enquiries, press 0.

You have selected 'other enquiries'. Please hold.

Da-daa—da-da-da—da-daa-da

That muffled tune. Mozart? Tchaikovsky? Vivaldi's Four Seasons? Whatever it was, that music was the last thing I wanted to hear. Forcing its way out of my shitty phone speakers like sand pouring out of a tap. It was grinding through, gritty, shrill, scraping against the silence of the flat. Filling the room. An orchestra in a tin can. I was in, at least, in the flat for the first time in a while, though nothing much had changed. The mounding pile of letters was still blocking the door. The same handful of keys sat idle in that brushed metal bowl. The same two pairs of shoes under the hall table. I sat down, undid my shoelaces and placed my scuffed

leather pair next to them, letting them join the queue.

The orchestra paused and the same, droll voice cut in again.

Thank you for calling Sheffield City Council. We are working hard to make sure you speak to one of our agents as soon as possible. All of our agents are currently engaged. You are number 191 in the queue.

I took a seat on the right-hand side of the sofa. This was my side; the furthest seat away from the TV in the corner. Dad preferred to sit on the opposite side, leaving a cushion's worth of space between us. The coffee table bridged the gap, square in the centre of the room. This was how things were. Each lamp angled just right, each picture-frame slotting alongside the next. The sideboards stood straight, each corner lining up perfectly with the grain of the floorboards. A quiet harmony of dark wood. But as with all things in life, so he would say to me, harmony requires order. I'd often wake to the sound of wooden legs scraping along wooden floors. The clunk and thud of a sideboard finding its new home in a new order of things. He had, after all, designed his space to sit along a grid. The flat was the perfect graph along which he could plot his points. When you opened the front door, you were greeted by a straight, narrow corridor: a bathroom to your right, a bedroom along to your left. Further along, there was another, smaller bedroom on your left before the corridor opened out into the living room and kitchen area. Carving off the right-hand side, the kitchen was narrow and was divided neatly off from the living area by a narrow bit of drywall and frosted glass tiles.

I turned my head to look at the glass, following the path as the light bounced off, leaving bright blotches along the floor. I'd spent countless Saturday mornings here, sitting on my side of the sofa, my eyes flicking between the 10:00 news and his slow silhouette on the other side, turned angular by the frosted panes. He always moved slowly, with care. As time went on, he only got slower and slower and—

Da-daa—da-da-da-da—da-daa-da

Thank you for calling Sheffield City Council. We are working hard to make sure you speak to one of our agents as soon as possible. All of our agents are currently engaged. You are number 174 in the queue.

I jolted, reached for my phone and hesitated. 174. We were a way off. I looked to the pile of letters by my side, and decided they could wait. I sat back again. I had plenty of time to wait.

I let my eyes trace the wall from corridor to kitchen and back round. Covering each and every inch of wall were paintings; art he'd picked up where he could. On the one wall, above a long, dark brown sideboard, hung a large canvas of swirling green and blue fish. On the other, a fiery red piece, even larger. I couldn't discern what it was meant to be, though he'd explained it to me once, not that I could remember. Some sort of hellscape, I think? Or maybe a shite attempt at the Yorkshire moors, only red. Burning. I didn't often look at it, in honesty. There were so many others; vague little stripey canvases and blotchy landscapes that'd pull your eye away. It was a difficult room to collect your thoughts in, let alone watch the TV.

Thank you for calling Sheffield City Council. We are working hard to make sure you speak to one of our agents as soon as possible. All of our agents are currently engaged. You are number 100 in the queue.

Da-daa—da-da-da-da—da-daa-da

It was all getting louder, steadily louder, so I looked to the letters again, letting them shuffle through my fingers. I began sifting through, every so often placing an advert or a takeaway menu to the side. The important ones I kept on my lap, and they all followed the same formula:

Name.

Address.

Bank or Council or Hopsice or Trust or Pension Fund.

These were the ones to be kept. Anything containing numbers, really. Bits from the council. The water company. The pension people. They needed filing, sorting, bubble-wrapping, keeping safe. This was the mission — the objective here. To take stock; inventory. I just wished they'd change that horrid music. Shoving its way out of my phone and up my nose.

Thank you for calling Sheffield City Council. We are working hard to make sure you speak to one of our agents as soon as possible. All of our agents are currently engaged. You are number 100 in the queue.

How long had it been now? 20 minutes? Just sitting. Listening. Waiting. I'd made my way through the pile, which had now become two piles. Useful and useless. But I'd reached my limit of scanning through.

The sun was streaming in, and my eyes were glazing over. Every so often, the shrill hum of the tin-can orchestra would jolt me and pull me between landscape and hellscape, red fire and blue swirling fish, causing my head to throb and my thoughts to wander all over. I decided to rehearse the script for when a human being actually picked up the phone.

'Hi there.' Felt a bit informal. 'Hello' seemed more appropriate, and yet, even then, each line, each variation on the same seemed to stumble off my tongue in a hideous way. It felt weighty, a heavy conversation and at the same time, like a total nothing. A waste of time. A performance.

That fucking music was driving me up the wall, and when I went up the wall, I was caught again. Green and blue swirling fish. Slashes of red. Lumpy landscapes. My eyes were getting raw. This room was getting louder and louder, and all I could do in response was fidget; rearrange the same bits of paper into different orders. The same thoughts kept sidling through. Name. Jonas Hansen. Me. Or Lennard Hansen, if it concerned him. Address. 20 Lancaster Court. S7, 1ME. Sheffield, South Yorkshire. England. United Kingdom. Bank or Council or Hopsice or Trust or Pension Fund or Electoral Register. These were the details that comprised a human life. The very same set of binary codes, digits and lists, that ensured you didn't slip through the net. This was bureaucracy of life

and death. And yet, these bits of paper were exactly that: scraps of paper with printed text on them. They looked so small – so insignificant – in my hands.

Da-daa—da-da-da—da-daa-da

I was resorting to the same funny little habits again. Running my hands through my hair, picking at my nails, pinching the bridge of my nose. I've never been good at waiting, and yet I've found myself sat expecting the next phase for a long time.

Thank you for calling Sheffield City Council. We are working hard to make sure you speak to one of our agents as soon as possible. All of our agents are currently engaged. You are number 53 in the queue.

It's funny, that. 53. We'd celebrated Dad's 53rd birthday not too long ago. He could just about still walk then, move with his slow precision. We'd spent that whole day in the flat, playing board games, watching a film, talking, as the summer sun sank behind the windows. We were both waiting, I know that now. Waiting around for the inevitable. It was on the tip of my tongue, but I could never bring myself to say it, and neither could he.

I thought I'd be able to resolve this; to say my piece in due course. But I remember that day in too much vivid detail. The harsh fabric of my cheap suit. That sickly ham sandwich, caked in too much butter. My ankles feeling the breeze as my trouser legs were hemmed too short. As for final words, in this case, it hardly mattered. Dad had gone 'mute', as they say, for the last few days. Unable to communicate, except for long, gasping passages, interrupted by a croaking noise or — even worse — a rattle. This, for me at least, rendered the whole 'final words' thing a little obsolete, as a few days into him being 'non-verbal', I'd begun to forget what our final exchange actually was. It could've been 'I love you'. That would be nice. It could've been 'goodnight'. In honesty, I fear it was something like 'remember to turn the lights off'.

Thank you for calling Sheffield City Council. We are working hard to make sure you speak to one of our agents as soon as possible. All of our agents are currently engaged. You are number 44 in the queue.

Da-daa—da-da-da—da-daa-da

I was running hot, sweating now, wiping my clammy hands along the coarse denim of my jeans. Over and over, to no luck. They were still damp with sweat. Maybe, I thought, I should take a bath. I left the letters in their piles, grabbed my phone and paced back down the corridor, eyes darting all over as I went.

And there it was, door half-ajar, revealing itself to me as I walked to the bathroom. Dad's bedroom, spacious enough, with room for a double bed, a bedside table and, a drawers, each placed a finger-width away from the wall behind. I could still see two chairs propped against a wall. One for me, one for guests who'd come through. Neighbours, old friends. We'd sit there, he in his bed, us in our chairs, talking about the weather outside. I marched towards the bathroom, phone in hand, before immediately running the bath. I pushed the plughole in with a force that surprised me, and sighed. I'd have to have a look.

Da-daa—da-da-da—da-daa-da

The grey linen sheets were still pushed to one side, scrunched up over the left half of the bed. The pillows on the right still dented with the heavy shape of the back of his head. His bedside table was now greyed with dust, but the handful of things that had always stood there remained: a phone charger, a glass of greying water, a watch still ticking along. His pair of reading glasses, limply folded, lay next to the rest. A piece of his face he'd remove. The lamp was craned away from the bed. I'd pushed it aside, I remember that. A sweeping motion of my left arm, to force a way in.

I felt sick. A deep pit opened in me as my eyes careered down to the base of the lamp. Propped against the broad base was that book. That fucking book. The one I'd bought him. Dad, I want to hear your story!

Strewn across its faux-leather front in a hideously playful font. It was a morbid idea, but the advert I'd seen at the time had worked its charms, buried deep in my mind. The point was, he'd write in it. He was meant to have written in it. His story. For me to read. A gift for me, I guess. But I suppose I'd never checked whether he'd actually done it. I certainly never saw him write in it, either. He wasn't a big reader. I doubt he was a writer. Balanced on top, with its suggestive glint, was a little gold-ish pen. They were a cheap-looking pair, the pen and the book. I put the pen in my pocket, took the book in one hand. Turned to face the door. The tinny orchestra stabbed through from the living room, the squeak of an 8-bit violin piercing my head.

Thank you for calling Sheffield City Council. We are working hard to make sure you speak to one of our agents as soon as possible. All of our agents are currently engaged. You are number 33 in the queue.

I'd returned to my side of the sofa, with the letters in their piles breaching his side. I opened a window to air the room out, and a slight breeze was blowing in. The letters were shuffling out of their neat little piles.

I had the book on my lap, as I sat there, tracing my finger up and down the spine. It was a birthday present, one I'd considered; taken pains over. I remember how loosely I'd wrapped it, but even then, he'd struggled against the tape. I can see him now, breathing heavily through a smile, slowly trying to fish a swollen finger under the seam. In the end, he'd handed it to me, looking away briefly as he did, before I tore off the wrapping paper in one rip.

I opened it to the sound of a slight snap. The crack of faux leather. Page 1.

Nothing.

Blank.

da-daa—da-da-da—

Silence.

Sheffield City Council. This is Mary speaking. How may I help?

I closed the book, placing it carefully to my left, before picking up my phone limply from the right. I looked down at the low-lit screen, a streak of sunlight patching my view. The seconds ticked along.

00:03.

00:04.

00:05.

Hello? This is Sheffield City Council. Mary speaking. Is there anybody there?

Loretta Gupta

TWO BODIES

SESAME SEED

It is Tuesday night, and you have school tomorrow, and Natasha is pregnant. This is problematic for a couple reasons - one being that she is, much like you, sixteen. The other reason, squirming on screen of your phone like a tapeworm in the space between

omg what?

and

i might keep it lol

is the fact that Tash doesn't eat. And you might be to blame. Well, maybe 'blame' is a strong word, but you certainly haven't done much to help the situation. You both spend hours poring over the backs of food packets and comparing the sizes of your wrists. You do mental math for her when she asks and she makes a racket in the girls' bathrooms while you stick your fingers down your throat. Both of you pretend that this is normal. This way, you don't have to talk to anyone who might help and Tash can continue dodging her mother's threats of hospitalisation.

She passes out in front of you on a regular basis and gets winded halfway up a flight of stairs, but telling your friend to get rid of her baby seems cruel. And maybe anti-feminist. You can't really bring yourself to congratulate her either. You get halfway through typing out a supportive, if noncommittal, response before you fall asleep - cheek warm on the dimming screen.

The next morning, Tash is waiting for you in the weird little alcove between the languages building and the canteen, picking at peeling paint with brittle fingernails. She's mad at you for not replying to her message,

tapping her foot a little bit like the bunny from Bambi and trying very hard to not look angry. *Hey. Hi!* You try sneaking a covert look at her stomach. Her foot thumps faster against the ground. *I'm not showing yet, dick.* You feign confusion at the idea of you would be scrutinising her body like that (you would and you are.) It's what the two of you do. You want to ask her approximately ten million questions (most of them sound like *are you on fucking drugs?*) The only thing that comes out is: *we have form now.* You should really try and address this before it gets out of hand, because you are 100% sure you are the only person who knows. The same way that you're the only person who knows about the laxatives in her pillowcase, her first kiss and the creepy guy next door she flirts with when her parents aren't home. Oh god, you hope this isn't creepy guy's baby. The baby would be half creepy and half anorexic. Not ideal. You're pretty certain it isn't him. Tash would have to have told you if she fucked creepy neighbour guy, surely. Not that any of that is relevant right now. What is relevant right now is that your friend is pregnant and you are very concerned and you are not even a bit excited that for the first time since you've known her, you might be winning.

BLUEBERRY

You do, finally, talk about it. After about a week and a half. It all sort of catapults out of you in a voice squeakier than you care to acknowledge. *You know you don't weigh enough to have a baby, right? Idiot. Yeah, I know. I was thinking of maybe like, recovering.* You blink. Tash blinks. *Recovering?* Tash fixes you with a withering look, as if you're stupid, as if she hasn't just shattered something like five years of shared pretence. *Or trying, anyway.* In all the time you've known each other, it has never occurred to you that Tash would ever try and get better. You can imagine her with a feeding tube shoved up her nose, in an inpatient facility surrounded by two dozen other emaciated girls, maybe. But voluntary recovery has always seemed ridiculous. She's worked so hard. She's entirely in control of herself. She's the perfect kind of sick. *That's ... really good, I'm happy for you.* And you are, but that doesn't stop her from snorting at the scared look on your face. *Don't worry, Purge, you don't have to do it with me.* She doesn't say *you don't have much to recover from, anyway.* It's implied, though.

GRAPE

Tash has tits. Which is new. Apparently swelling is pretty normal at this point, you've been looking it up online. You don't think people are normally able to tell at this point, but it's such a drastic difference on her that you choke on your own spit when you see her back at school after the bank holiday weekend. You feel kind of pervy, though you don't mean it like that. Nobody else seems to have noticed, so you might just be seeing things. Or maybe you're just too familiar with her body.

Tash is going to tell her parents tonight, apparently, about the baby and the anorexia. (They won't be surprised about the latter.) She needs to see a doctor pretty soon. She needed to see a doctor five years and twenty diets ago. She still won't tell you who knocked her up but she promises that it is *not* creepy neighbour guy. You don't know why she won't tell you. She's probably going to be hauled into the hospital before she can get through half of the conversation, but you don't tell her that. Her parents have been looking for an excuse, while Natasha toes that line between waifish and skeletal. She crossed that line a little while ago, but they're kind of confrontation averse. She won't really have a choice anymore, you guess.

Tash drags you to the bathroom during lunch to hurl her guts up while you're halfway through a pack of crisps. You can feel the grease and salt sting your cracked lips as you hold her hair out of the way. It's weird to see her throwing up, that's always been your thing. She wipes at her mouth with the edge of her jumper and rasps at you. *I don't know how you do this shit everyday.* You pat her on the shoulder and try to discretely shake a clump of her hair off your fingers. She stands up to turn the sink on. *If you want to go too, you should get on with it, we've only got ten minutes.* You do.

AVOCADO

Natasha's coming back to school today. There was a stay in a paediatric ward to avoid refeeding syndrome (voluntary), an NG tube (semi-voluntary) and a week at home with her parents and a meal plan and locked bathroom doors (jury still out). She's avoided the ED Unit, because nobody really wants to let a baby gestate in one of those and there's probably no beds anyway. Her parents freaked out *for like, a full*

week, but they came around. Tash doesn't really know what made them calm down. She didn't want to ask. People at school have been talking about her and staring at you, twittering to each other in the halls, which is an odd experience. None of them really know what's going on, but they think they do.

She's stood out by the canteen like she always is, foot thumping and swamped in a big grey hoodie that is definitely against uniform rules. Her face looks different, no longer as bug eyed. Her cheeks are fuller. She's still gorgeous and you're still a little annoyed about it. You throw your arms around her. *You look great*. She makes a face and leans down to tie her shoe. You catch the outline of her stomach through her hoodie for a second and pretend not to notice.

GRAPEFRUIT

Everybody knows now, and you're glad that Tash has to eat in the nurse's office, even if you can't get to the bathroom as quick as you'd like to. You both perch on the exam table, swinging your legs and suggesting horrible baby names to each other. The nurse walks in and out every few minutes and tries to make it look like she isn't just there to make sure that Tash is eating. You both burst out in giggles every time she leaves. You make the trek up to Spanish, ten minutes late, after the nurse is satisfied that Tash isn't going to hightail it to the bathroom to spew. As if she ever would. The classroom is at the top of the languages block, up three flights of steep stairs. She's kind of clumsy now, so you hold her hand up the stairs. Natasha's fingernails dig into the back of your hand, sharp and sudden. You hiss and turn your head, *what the fuck*, but she's gasping and swaying. Her other arm flails out towards the banister. You manage to get onto the last step. You pull her with you, both of you ending up on the landing before she can drag you both down to the bottom of the stairs. She's lying on top of you and you're yelling for help.

ACORN SQUASH

The baby is fine, but Tash has to stay in the hospital. You should go see her. You spend your evenings with food laid out in rows in front of you,

missing your friend and doing absolutely nothing to fix it. You have your laptop open, playing YouTube videos of skinny girls eating for hours on end. You stare dead eyed at the screen, shoving food down your throat as your stomach balloons out. You eat. The girl on the screen eats. Is Tash eating? You're full and your abdomen is throbbing and you wonder if this is what Tash feels like with the baby inside her, kicking and writhing. You slump over the toilet and get her out of your system. You lie on the tile floor and lift up your shirt and count bones.

Your cheeks have become puffer. Your mouth always tastes a little like blood. Your skin is sallow and your teeth have gotten yellower in the darkness of your bedroom. You hear a midroll ad for baby formula start to play from your laptop.

EGGPLANT

Tash looks like shit and she keeps losing at cards and everything in her hospital room is beeping at a rhythm that you can't keep track of. You're trying to not be annoyed by it. Beep. Beep. Beep. Tash throws down a three. *How are you doing?* You throw down an ace. *What do you mean?* Natasha rolls her eyes and puffs out her cheeks like she's imitating a chipmunk. *You know what I mean*. You tap your foot the same way she does. *You're one to talk*. She makes a short, huffy sighing noise and doesn't say anything for a moment. *They want to do a C-Section*. You pick at your cuticles. *What, now?* She puts her hand down, giving up on the game. *No, like closer to the time, but they don't think I can handle like, actually giving birth*. It's not a brag, but it feels like one. You pick up the shitty plastic jug on the rolling table and shake it. Empty. *Oh. Is that ... okay?* Tash looks like she wants to say something mean, and you don't blame her. She shrugs instead. *At least my vag won't get all torn up*. Beep. Beep. Beep. A nurse pops her head around the door and tells you that visiting time is over soon. You're trying to think of something to say to make her laugh, but you can't think of a single funny thing. You tell her that you'll be back in a couple of days. *Whatever*. You call her a bitch and pretend that you don't mean it.

The hospital is in the centre of the city, two buses away from your house. The stop where you change buses is next to an off-license and not much else. You buy an almost expired loaf of bread for 99p and sit on the

red bench ripping off pieces of it, chewing each slice into a lumpy, sodden mass that you hold on your tongue for exactly ten seconds. And then you spit it out onto the pavement and watch it splatter to the ground. It looks a bit like paper mache. The bus pulls up and you sidestep the mess to get on. A woman in a cable knit sweater gets off the bus and makes a disgusted noise. You wipe your chin.

COCONUT

Tash looks tired, more than she ever did when she wasn't eating. If you can call what she's doing right now 'eating'; they tubed her again a couple days after your last visit, following an incident where a jacket potato was thrown against the wall. Her eyes are red-rimmed, her lips are all chewed up. You're staring at her face to avoid looking at any other part of her: her bump, her wrists, her chest. You're still pretending not to notice any changes, still kicking back the sick, gleeful part of your brain that keeps saying that you've won. She knows how you feel, she felt the same way about you for a long time. Neither of you would admit it, though. You sit on the bed and neither of you speak. You're perched at her feet. You take both of her hands in yours, linking fingers. This is the other part of it, for both of you. You rub your thumbs up and down the side of her hands, taking in the softness of her skin. She pulls one of your hands closer, awkwardly stretching your arm towards her face. Her lips press against your knuckles, dry and cracked and warm. You both drop your hands to your sides and look away from each other. You spot a stain on the wall to the left of you. Natasha's mother walks into the room and kisses you on the cheek. *Hello, lovey!* It's easy for some people.

PAPAYA

The C-Section happens earlier than the doctors want it to, by a few weeks. It's Thursday when it happens, so you have to wait a couple of days to go see Tash. They say that the baby is okay, but she's too small and she needs help breathing. You don't get how that all adds up to 'okay', in all honesty. Tash refuses to go see her, but her parents take you to go look - she's tiny, wriggling and fleshy, in a room full of tiny, wriggling, fleshy things

in glass boxes. They're both cooing and waving. It's uncomfortable to see, like a betrayal of some sort. You back away and head back to Natasha's room, to find the person that you're meant to be taking care of.

Her eyes look dead, but she smiles when you step into the room. There's a barely eaten sandwich on her bedside (now isn't the time to bring that up.) *They drag you upstairs?* You nod, slowly. Her expression is too flat to discern much of anything and it freaks you out a little, makes your eyes dart around the place and your lips press together. She ignores this. *How are you? How was it?* She shrugs. *Fine.* You wait, thinking that she's going to keep talking. She isn't. *How come you don't want to go see her?* She shrugs again. It's only a bit annoying. *Well, when do you go home?* You sit down in the chair by her bed. *In a few days, I think. Can't fucking wait.* Your eyes drift to the sandwich on the side. *You planning on eating that?* (Guess you're bringing it up anyway.) Natasha's eyes get all hot and angry. You should shut up. *You've just been doing kind of okay, maybe you should* - Tash starts screaming, which you should've seen coming. She's all tears and spit, wet-hot, telling you to shut up and fuck off and get out. You try and get close to her, calm her down, but she's grabbing that plastic jug. She throws it at you and misses. It hits the wall behind you. The lid and the body of it fall to the floor, separated.

Somebody rushes into the room and you decide to shut up and fuck off and get out.

HONEYDEW

Radio-fucking-silence. She's not at school. She doesn't text. She doesn't call. At some point during the first few weeks of you texting and texting, she turned on her read receipts, just to make it clear that she's ignoring you on purpose. You're going more than a little crazy. There hasn't been much change in your day to day: you go to school, you try not to fall asleep in class, you eat, you throw up, you go home, you eat, you throw up. It all seems a bit more directionless than before, though. You wonder if you've been this pathetic the whole time, just waiting around for somebody to follow. You wonder if she's thinking about you while she hides away in her bedroom and ignores the hunger pangs and runs back and forth from the window to the door for hours on end. Probably not.

WATERMELON

It's been almost two months since the last time you saw Tash. You're sure that she's suffering and lonely and skinnier than ever. You want to see it more than you've ever wanted to see anything. You miss napping in the same bed. You miss the comparison. You miss her body and your body together. You never want to see her again. You text her again. and again. and again. Your throat is raw and your cheeks swollen and you have little cuts on your knuckles left by your own rotten teeth.

Natasha has a heart attack in her bedroom at the ripe old age of sixteen while you hover over the toilet bowl and her parents visit the baby in the hospital. You won't find out for a week, when her mother calls yours. You'll be invited to the funeral, but you won't go.

Margareta Durovcikova

A WHISPER OF CAUTION

It never happens when you expect it, but it will come for you, too. Sure, you might start to grow dark, thick hair, and suddenly your chest might fill your blouse, and the richtár's son with his handsome blond locks might look at you a little too long at the village zábava while you jump and skip and throw your slender, softening body into the air, singing with the other girls,

Dievčatá, dievčatá, pozor dávajte	Girls, girls, take care
Svoje líčka červené majte	Your cheeks red and fair
Ale domov, ale domov	On your way home, on your way home
Po hradскеj nechodte	The highway you should beware

but when the day comes that you feel a wet streak running down your leg and you think it's just sweat, you will certainly not expect it. You will keep brushing potato leaves and squishing the yellow mandelínky bugs, those little devils that feast on your potatoes before you get the chance; you will keep squishing them between your fingers, and you will not expect it. The sun will burn your neck, still pink and sore from yesterday and the day before that and the day before that and the month before that. The air will be stuck and heavy, moved only by the rhythmic ruffling of your father's scythe through the wheat stalks or your mother's and your sisters' singing. You will wipe your forehead on your sleeve and feel a sharp stab in your stomach, and you will think that the apple seed you swallowed last night had settled into your stomach and sprouted roots into your groin, just as your sister had been telling you.

You will rub your stomach, staining your linen shirt with your fingers, leaving streaks of black and blue bug juices. You will be sticky with sweat. Then the bugs will rise from the potatoes, all at once into the sky, one big swarm of yellow and black, and their wings will flutter, and the sky will poke through the small gaps between them. You will pull a weed from the earth, its fangs will sink into your fingers as you yank it from dark, fertile earth still damp from last night's thunder and the roots of the apple tree now growing inside of you will pierce through your stomach and back and as they curl around the outside of your thighs and then the bugs will cover the sky entirely and then only black. A dark night will descend over you.

Mariša! Mariša! Preboha. Wake up, child! Mother's voice will drift towards you.

You will open your eyes and blink and sit up. Your skirt will be damp and the fields spinning. Father will run to you with a bucket of water, cold straight from the well, and your mother will wash your face. The roots inside of you will tighten their grip around your stomach, and you will cry out from pain. Your parents will help you stand, and that will be when you will finally see your skirt dotted with crimson like ladybugs. Mother will smile and whisper into your ear. You're a woman now. She will send you home.

You will walk through the field, bunching up your skirt and holding it close to your stomach while your sisters will stare and the boys from the village will laugh. You will stop by the shallow brook and sit on the bank, watching as the wet between your legs grows and gushes into the water, like a red ribbon rushed downstream. You will imagine the red streak you must have left behind you in the flax and on the hedges lining the fields, in the grass and on the road, a red trace that leads to you. A tiny toad will jump onto a stone next to you. You will extend your hand to her, and she will jump in.

Blood on the road is usually a bad sign. Why was mother smiling? you will ask, and the toad will blink at you, her bumpy brown back pulsing with her hasty heart. You will draw a cross on her back to protect her from the

witches, and she will leap into the grass as a chorus of croaking nears.

You will take off your vest and then your blouse, and you will stand in the river, and sunlight will fall onto your chest marked with pink lines from where your skin stretched and ached, and you will soak your skirt and rub it between your fingers, watching the bloody spots fade into brown.

You will wonder what it means that you're a woman now. Were your older sisters women? You thought they were just your sisters. You will not feel any different, except the raging tree growing in your stomach. You will be glad to have a reason to return home and hide in the cool dark of the house. The grove behind you will swoosh, and you will think you see shadows in the corner of your eye. You will wrap yourself in the dripping underskirt and dry apron to keep you cool as you walk past the grove, past the wheatmill, along the highway and into your house. Is this what it means to be a woman, now? You will wonder as you wrap a clean cloth between your legs, feeling more like your baby sister.

After it happens, your mother will bathe you and wash your face, and you will fall into a fever for days or weeks or months. You will sweat through your shirt and your skirt, stained brown, which your mother will desperately try to pull off. After it happens, she will pinch your cheeks for colour and put you into your new Sunday best, fit for a woman, but you will scream and cry and scratch her. You will become a wild thing much like the stray cat that sits on your doorstep and hisses at anyone that comes near. After it happens, you will never remove your clothes again.

But when you drift off into sleep, your shirt still damp from bathing, you will not expect to wake up to the sound of the door slamming and the chicken screaming as they fly into their coops. You will not expect the son of the richtár to be standing by the foot of your bed looking at your nipples poking through your linen shirt. You will not expect the bulge in his trousers and the thing that emerges from them like a grass snake. The roots inside of you will wrap around your legs and arms and fill your throat and grasp you firmly, and you will not be able to move.

When it happens, you will remember the time when you went to play by the apple orchard at the rectory with the other children and how you were the only one brave enough to weave your body through the branches of a tall tree and pull apples from them and how you bit into one and it tasted sour and tart and how you threw some to your friends who pulled faces and threw them on the ground half-eaten and how on your way down your leg slipped and you got caught hanging by your ankle and how the children cried and ran into the rectory and pulled the priest out by his sleeves and how he ran back into the rectory and hid, his face pale with anger and fear, until the men from the village fetched father from the field, how he climbed the tree and held you in his arms and sang your favourite lullabies all the way home and how even when you were hanging there in the tree, alone, your ankle immobile, and you worried less about the state of your leg and more about the beating you'd get for stealing the priest's apples, you knew that somebody was still coming to save you.

But when your body is being torn apart with pain, and you lay there rigid, when your arms and legs are heavy, and sweat drips into your eye from a man's forehead, when he pulls off your skirt and then your shirt and squeezes your bloated breasts, when it really happens, and you are a woman, know that no one is coming to save you.

Robbie Barlow

NOTHING MUCH

Maybe that's my problem. I've never set out to hurt anyone.

I didn't mean to meet Bo. It just happened.

We bumped into each other last week outside M&S. She'd barely changed except for her business gear. Head to toe in stony grey and pointed shoes like half the wankers from back in the day. She pulled it off to be fair, especially with the open collar. I hadn't even scrubbed the mud off me trainers.

'Heya, Cal!' she said, all eager to speak to someone from planet Earth.

'Hi.'

'God, I've not seen you in ages!' She ran a finger through her hair. 'How's things?'

'You know,' I said. 'Same as really.'

'I'm just heading back to the office.' She was brimming with enthusiasm. Too much energy for a Tuesday afternoon.

I was about to put a pin in it then and there, but something our Vin said jumped back in me head. 'Up to much at the weekend?'

Her eyes lit up like an extra watt had flickered through her skull.

'No, I'm free.'

'Fancy a coffee?' The words flew out, like I'd rehearsed them off a cassette. 'Been ages since I've seen you.'

'Absolutely,' she said, flashing her perky smile. 'Sounds like fun.'

She'd get over it. Move on in the end.

#

Our Vin once said, "If someone's gonna hurt you, get to them first. Let them know the score." Advice like his usually comes at the cost of a black eye or two. The world likes to try and step on those bold enough to say

things as they are.

Bo and I agreed on Saturday, 01:00 PM outside Waterstones on Deansgate. I'll kill the time, keeping an eye from the letting agents' office across the street. The one clad top to toe in scaffolding. Enough cover if you pick the right corner.

I've made a true effort: me best straight-fit Levi's, topped with a killer shirt and cardigan combo. Fresh from the ironing board. I even clipped down to a short stubble, splashed with a dash of Hugo Boss.

On the bus there's this jittery tingling all over me. Easily more exciting than a proper first date. Each speed bump is a true wind-up – simple seconds thrown to the wind when I could be soaking up me success.

I hop off the bus at 12:40 and walk the fifteen minutes from the Shudehill to Waterstones. I straighten myself up, follow the "Brando" look. Rolled back shoulders. Hands tucked in my pockets, thumbs dipping out. A simple trick I picked up from YouTube.

At this rate, it'll take her some time to bounce back. Maybe a year or two. Girls like her always do in the end. Bit of confusion. The aftermath embarrassment. Straight on to the next lad in the back of some BMW down Spring Water Lake. They never choose sensibly. Never go for decent lads in the end.

I reach the scaffolding, the clouds splitting above. One looked mean.

With one knee against the wall, my straight leg jigs like a seismograph. The doorway cycles through people coming and going. Pretty soon, she'll be here. First the confusion. Then it'll hit her.

I draw out me phone, look at the time: 01:05.

Five minutes. Can't expect everyone to land centre-stage.

That mean cloud cuts open, starting the thick drops. Enough moisture to tickle me nose. I take a stick of gum out me pocket and chew.

People rush past, ducking into shops, popping out umbrellas. Couples hunch together, twin humps covering their heads with newspapers. Same bland moans about the weather.

I chew harder on me gum, almost gritting me teeth.

Still nothing at the shop door.

Proper quick gust ploughs through the street. Leftover newspapers take over, skittering past me. Normally like this time of year. Everything slows down. Matches me speed.

Check me phone again. 01:12. I run me finger through me inbox. Always the chance of a text. Missed phone call.

Nothing.

There's late, then there's this. She's probably laughing, sipping on a fucking latte, sat opposite some six-foot, muscle-bound dipshit. The kind that blab on about their Audis and MDMA memories in Ibiza. You'd get more sense from a fucking tadpole.

'Excuse me?'

Turn around. Some six-foot brutes eyeballing me. Shaved head, light bouncing off it under the storefront bulb. Clean-shaven. Not a single blotch on his face.

'Yes?'

'D'you have an appointment?' His eyes are pinned to mine.

I hear him, clear as day, speaking plain English. But it's like I can't fathom an ounce of what he's saying. Like what that philosopher said about speaking to a lion.

He repeats himself. Defiant, I maintain eye contact.

'Can y'leave the premises, please?' He's folding his arms. The nerve. 'Can't loiter here, pal.'

Don't call me fucking pal, mate.

Verbal sparring will be meaningless. Maybe attention-grabbing.

Shuffle into the downpour, people watching me from behind him.

The rain whips everything in sight, soaks me through, deepens the shade of the tarmac. Me clothes shrink-wrap on me. Me chest tightens.

I pull out me phone. Tap out her number. Listen to the dial.

Straight to voicemail.

Not this. Not now. Fucking people like her–

'Quick!' a blurted shriek from the side, the hurried steps closing in. Bo's rushing towards me, bracing the wind with her umbrella, barely able to keep herself dry. 'Let's get inside.'

We bolt for the stairs, climb them as fast as we can. Wasn't supposed to be me stood out there in the rain.

'Sorry I'm late,' she says. 'Rushed back to get my brolly.'

Probably came out of pity. Couldn't handle the guilt. I wipe me drenched mop of a fringe.

We head to the café. I buy a Coke, find us some seats. She strolls to our

table, carrying one of those tall, clear glasses.

'Gotta love a good coffee,' she says, parking herself.

I shrug. 'Not a fan.'

'You're kidding?'

'Nope.' I sip from my glass, giving it a wave.

She nods. 'Had to ditch those,' she stirs her drink with one of them overly long spoons. 'Too much caffeine and sugar. No good for the waistline.'

Give her a grin. 'Doesn't look like it.'

She brings the glass to her mouth, finally takes a sip.

'You been up to much since school?' she asks.

The last seven years whizz through me head. It all fails to take shape. 'Nothing much really. Bit of shop work. That's it, really.'

'Oh, come on. You must've been up to something.' She smiles, clinks her spoon against the glass like she's ringing a bell. 'I refuse to believe you haven't.'

'Mostly old people in a card shop.'

'You got any good stories?' she asks.

'What do you mean?'

'Everyone's got a good work story,' she starts stirring again, tap, tap, tapping. 'You ever try and work somewhere like here? You were into your books in school.'

I take a sip. 'Tried applying. Rejected me a few times. Can't see why.'

'Probably more of an HMV person then,' she says, laughing. She shuts her mouth, like she's caught herself in a trap.

I drum my fingers on the table. The man in the queue looks like the guy who forced me out in the rain.

'What do you miss about school?' she asks.

'Does anyone miss it?' I laugh.

'No, really,' she smiles with total sincerity. 'What do you miss?'

'Having more time, I suppose.' All I can do is shrug. 'No responsibility.'

'I get you.'

'Don't miss any of the people, though,' I say.

She gives me this funny look, like I've just put me muddied trainers on the table.

'Nah,' I say. 'All nobheads.'

She cups her hands on her glass. 'Bit harsh. Does mentioning school make you angry?'

'Not really. Why?'

'You sound it.' She gives me this dead serious look in the eye. 'Anyway, not all of them were.'

'Spade's a spade.'

'I remember you used to say that,' she says. 'Have you spoken to anyone from school?'

I shake me head.

'So, you don't know if any of them have changed.'

'People don't change.'

Her smile drops. 'And yet you've always been hard to read.'

'How so?'

'I don't know. Could never tell what you wanted...'

'I see.'

'...anyway, most people from school are married, having kids or moved away now.'

'Typical.'

Me clothes are still soaked. Leaving water trails wherever I go like a snail. She eyeballs the puddle on the table.

'You didn't bring an umbrella?' she asks.

'Nah.'

'Why not?'

Once again, I shrug. Clear me throat. Minutes go by, we run the small talk routine: her work, what she's been up to. The only thing drying's our conversation.

'Are you seeing your family for Christmas?' She runs her fingers through her hair, like she did the other day.

'Not my thing.'

'Oh.' There's a pause. 'I've got a trip booked for Australia.'

'Cool,' I say. 'Why Australia?'

'Always wanted to go. I don't go away a lot. Want to explore more,' she takes a lengthy sip of her drink. 'Got some hiking booked.'

There's plenty more I can say. Nothing comes to mind.

'You like hiking?' she asks.

'I guess.' There was a time I could pass for outdoorsy. Fifteen years old,

strumming a guitar down by the stream. A couple of half-practiced songs in between skimming stones. 'Used to go for walks with me ex. Not done that in a while.'

'Why not go on your own?'

'Just boring really,' I say. 'Nowhere good except the woods near hers but not going there.'

'Really,' she says, leaning in. 'You've got plenty of other places...'

'Too many bad memories with that stuff.'

She giggles, as though it's something to laugh at. She looks at what's left of her drink and starts stirring again. Creature of habit. 'You can't avoid something just because of your ex.'

'I could start going gym,' I say. 'Last place I'd bump into her,' I laugh.

She doesn't. She just sits there, shaking her head. 'Might do you some good.'

Maybe then it won't just be psychos chasing after me. Probably get more airheads in me inbox. Personalities held together by Sellotape.

'You can go with someone. Make it fun.'

'So long as it's not one of them posers, looking themselves in the mirror all day, judging everyone who comes in.'

'That why you don't go?' She tilts her head.

'Pretty much.'

There's another pause. 'Not everyone's like that, though.'

'Trust me. They are.'

She leans back, starts rummaging through her handbag. 'Coffee's cold,' she laughs to herself.

Minutes stretch out in the stillness.

She checks her phone and nods sharply. 'Sorry – my mum's just texted me. I've got to go.' She leaves her drink, a drop or so left in the glass. I slip me bottle back in me blazer pocket.

She gives me one of those limp, over-the-shoulder hugs at the door.

'Nice to see you.'

'And you.'

She walks out, opens her umbrella, but the weather's cleared, the street seeming brighter. She refolds it, rushes off without looking back.

I turn around, head back to the shelves and browse. Strangers pass me by, picking up classics, rifling through flashy new releases.

I can try again. I won't even turn up next time.

With any luck, I can bump into someone worth my time.

END

Sangeetha Sagar

THIS TIME

When he came into the room that evening, she could smell the alcohol on him and knew it was going to be a more violent night than usual. As he stripped her of her clothes and then her bra, she watched him carefully. The rage in his eyes as he saw her bloody breasts made her smile – she loved it when she controlled him this way. But after he slammed her down on the bed and fell on top of her, she turned her face away so she didn't have to look into his face anymore.

It had started the same night as their wedding. The curated man melting away to reveal the raging man beneath. The man who didn't want to make love to her unless he felt he was forcing her to, unless he saw her struggling under him, unless he saw her terrified and crying out, unless he was choking her until the lights grew dim around her. She *had* almost blacked out from the pain and suffocation the first night. Which would have made it all bearable perhaps, but she had been forced to remain conscious. This was the same man her parents had trusted her life with only a few hours back. But the man they had assured her would protect her heart had first ensured he destroyed her body.

She had told her parents everything when he'd driven her to visit them a month after. She had jumped out of his car as fast as she could, even before it had fully stopped, pushed open the creaky black gates, and ran through the garden with its overgrown everything, half afraid that he would change his mind about the visit, would be running behind her to grab her and take her back. But the metal gate had clanged shut behind her, and the birdsong had enveloped her in its comforting arms almost immediately, as it had every morning when she went to school, as it had every evening when she came back, never absent, never changing. The coconut trees outside the pink-and-white walls of the one-storey home had waved comfortingly, beckoning her in, and she had allowed them

to trick her, trick her into believing that everything would be alright, that everything would go back to what it was. Her mother and father had sat very still on their respective sofas as she recounted what he had done to her every night. She had felt the relief pouring out of her, that she was able to get the words out, that there were two other people who would now share her pain. They had looked horrified, and she had been so sorry that she did not want this marriage, did not want this man they had so carefully selected for her. She would return to her childhood home, carefree and light-hearted again. She had spent the rest of the afternoon in a dreamy haze, walking around the bedroom she grew up in, taking in what would soon be hers again: dusty books from her grandparents and the mat on the floor that was her bed and the speckled silver incense holder and the too-thin green curtains and the locked wardrobe with all the precious bedsheets and pillowcases for special guests. But as it turned out, her parents hadn't been horrified enough. Because if they had, they wouldn't have allowed him to drag her back to his car when he returned in the evening, her screams echoing through the unlit corners of her house, the shadows of her parents on the sofas as still and silent as the water in the shallow stone pond across the veranda around which she had grown up.

This time, when he had taken her back to his house with its skylight and silence and too-sterile floors, where nothing moved or sang or laughed, she had yanked out a strand of hair. The pain felt good, too slight, but good, so she yanked out another, this time with as much force as she could muster. Another followed. She stood up and went to the mirror hung outside the bathroom door after a few minutes – a part of her scalp shone dull yellow through all the mass of brown. She'd always had too thick hair. There was too little scalp compared to hair. She returned to her position on the floor, legs crossed, the brown pile growing larger by her left knee.

This time he had brought another friend home, a large man with eyes sunk so deep in, the skin sagged heavily below them. As four hands mauled at her body, she wondered what it would feel like to pierce those eyes with her fingers. Would she be able to prise the eyeballs outwards so he didn't look as scary? Would the blood squirt out, onto her face, or drip, drip, drip out slowly, onto his own? Would he scream and beg for her to stop, then thank her for making him look normal again? What if she

could only bring one eyeball forward and the other would be left behind? What if she squished one eyeball in her hand after she wrenched it out, and he would forever be called the one-eyeball man? The thought made her giggle.

The maid he brought in to clean the room of her vomit had a shrewd face. She immediately didn't like her. *Never trust clever women*, her mother had said often. *They abuse the freedom they get and will get up to no good. Wild, free women who didn't know their place would ruin themselves and everyone around them.* And yes, this maid looked too clever for her own good, her eyes moving everywhere, landing on her face and bruised knees several times, taking in every aspect of the room with quick-moving, darting eyes. He stood near the door watching, and politely asked the maid if she would please work a bit faster, as they would be having guests over soon; his wife was feeling very poorly and would like some quiet time, could he bring any water or food for her, and he would definitely be giving her some extra money for her services this evening. The maid smiled at him, nodded, her eyes flickering to her and back to him again – of course, anything for sir. Her eyes looked almost wild. A wild woman. Yes, she was sure this maid was up to no good.

He had left no food for her the next morning – it was his way of punishing her for throwing up. She felt a pang of regret for an instant, but then decided this was good for her. The faster she withered away, the faster he would be defeated.

She grabbed a figurine from the table and stripped it of its clothes. She beat it on the ground a few times, breaking open the clay outside. The structure beneath was wire, as she had hoped. She pulled it out, lifted her shirt, and dragged it down her breast, one after the other. The blood seeped out and trailed down her stomach onto her white skirt. She let her white shirt fall back to soak up the remaining blood. She'd worn white on purpose today, just for this.

He towered over her, and she refused to look up at him, to acknowledge his presence in any way. She knew he loved her to be perfect, so her perfect hair was now on the floor, her perfect clothes were now streaked with blood, her perfect body was now covered in bruises, and her perfect home was now covered in vomit. When he reached down to grab her, she surrendered into his arms; she had given up on the screaming and

resisting a few days back. She would hurt him in other ways. For now, she would have to allow him to hurt her.

This time he raised a glass to her lips as she lay on the bed the next night. She was confused. He had never shown any affection towards her. She drank hungrily; she had refused to eat anything he had laid out for her on the table when he left for work. The water sloshed around her empty stomach, the room spun even more than it had all these days, and several strange faces of strange men swam up next to his.

Afterwards, she ran to the window. A mass of black covered the horizon as far as she looked. It took her less than a moment to realise that the cloud wasn't a swarm of insects. It was a sea of people. Dead people.

She was in a forest. The trees whispered among themselves, then to her, the leaves rustling as if in pain, in sorrow. It sounded as it sounded when he was hunting her.

She stood still, trying to make out, over the thumping of her chest, from which direction the sound had come.

This time it came from directly overhead.

A thousand bloodied faces looked down at her from among the trees. Some shrouded, their faces half in shadow, the rest bared in all its horror.

The forest floor wasn't wet with dew. It was wet with blood.

The bodies weren't moving. Why were none of them moving? The stillness made the sickening horror that rose in her more pronounced.

These were women. They were women like her.

Was she unconscious underneath him? Could she open her eyes? In the forest, others were coming now, not the beaten and bloodied woman. Others. Others dancing. She had loved to dance. Until he made her, made her dance, made her strip, before he raped her.

This time was different.

The blue goddess was dancing with her. Kali was there. The chain of skulls around her neck clunked as she moved, bloodied dagger in one hand, severed head in another, a third hand holding a ceramic plate beneath to catch the dripping blood.

Her mother had refused to allow any idols of Kali in the house – this vengeful, fierce, and unafraid warrior woman. Instead, she adorned their home with beautiful, graceful, pink-cheeked goddesses with innocent smiles and books beneath their feet and sitars in their hands and lotuses

on their heads. The blue goddess had no smile – she had a lolling bright red tongue. When she'd first come across an idol of the blue goddess in the new temple, she had cried in fear and hid behind her mother, clutching onto her saree. Her mother had never taken her back to the new temple again, but the image had been seared into her brain. She had found herself standing outside the temple shop the next day on her way to school, tracing the red tongue with her eyes, marvelling at the rage on the blue face. She had run away again, only to return the next day, then the next, until one day the blue goddess was sitting in her school backpack, wrapped in yesterday's newspaper, her lunch money for the next month gone. At home, she had hidden her beneath all the untouched new clothes in the wardrobe, only taking her out when she'd felt helpless, or weak, or out of control, just to be able to clutch her to her chest, or stare at her fierce face, trying to rearrange her own face to mimic the same look of fierceness. And after the wedding, when no one was looking, she'd hidden her again that one time she'd visited her home, that time she had found out her parents wouldn't save her, no one would save her; that time, she had hid the goddess deep in the pocket of her favourite blue skirt, and brought her with her to her new house.

So when the goddess had joined her today, she knew why she had come.

She opened her eyes. She was in the room. He was in the room. Above her. In the corner of the room was something else.

The goddess had left her jewelled dagger behind.

This time, it was the man who was crawling on the floor. His left hand was bloody, and where he moved, he left a trail of red in his wake. His right leg was twisted at an odd angle, but he still seemed to be moving fast for someone whose face was contorted in such pain. He wanted to get away from the goddess, and it had to be fast.

His pants got caught on a nail on the hardwood floor, but he lurched forward, still on his knees, refusing to stop. Now his left knee was bloody too, where the nail had pierced it. He supported himself on his good elbow and good leg, and kept crawling.

In the dark he banged his head on the door ahead. He looked up, and with great effort got up on his good knee, said a little prayer under his breath, and twisted the knob. He crashed back down onto the floor, exhausted with the effort, breathing hard. But the door opened, and

through the pain his face broke into one of glee for just a fleeting second.

He crept through, and squinted in the darkness. Beyond was another long hall, at the end of which was another door, a key glinting firmly in its lock. He started moving faster yet, as if he knew he had reached the end of his journey, freedom waiting beyond the carved brown door.

One-fourth through, halfway through, three-fourths through, almost there... his hand stretched out as he approached the door, pure elation sketched on his face. Sweat dripped into his eyes, and he drew out a green handkerchief from his pocket, mopping up his face, taking an odd moment to pause and breathe. In hindsight, the complacency was what caught him out. He had got to the door, hoisted himself up by the handle, and turned the key. The shadow fell over him just as the door opened, and the knife entered his shoulder blade first, and as he fell back, pierced the back of his neck. The green handkerchief floated down with specks of red; he crashed down on top of it, and the door to the busy street slammed shut.

The blue goddess towered over him as he shivered on the floor, bleeding out from so many places, she couldn't count, though she tried.

Please, I'm your husband, please, he begged, his lips trembling so hard she could barely hear the words.

The goddess smiled, teeth biting down on her protruding tongue, dagger held high in one hand. She was a wild woman now, and she was enjoying the way she talked and moved, slow and calm and powerful, enjoying that he was crying with loud, heaving sobs now, almost like a child. She was surprised by how puny he was on the floor, curled up in this state, clutching his stomach tight, desperately trying to stop the bleeding from where she had driven the dagger into him with such force earlier, that she had surprised herself. She bent down and rolled him over gently, caressing his arm with her one hand, and the relief on his face at the thought of her forgiveness brought much amusement to her. She felt such power surge through her; she felt almost insane, but fully unstoppable. She brought the knife down to his throat from high up with her other hand, and watched as he choked, his eyes struggling to remain open, to fight, until they couldn't anymore.

Not this time.

She was a wild, free woman now.

Yundi Shen

TROPICAL MONSOON

Annie Ernaux said, the summers before twenty-five are long. That year I was twenty-four. My four-year degree had taken me six, but in the end I graduated, looked for work, found none, and so, amid my family's reproaches, I travelled. To me it is the interval between one summer and the next that feels long, as if I had to pass through two autumns, two winters, two springs before I could reach summer again, reach again that bench where I first met you.

My luck was poor: the forecast said a typhoon from the Pacific would make landfall in a day or two, and just then the little island felt like the exhaust of an air-conditioning unit, hot as a damp quilt pressed over the face. You sat there in a charcoal pinstriped shirt, black jeans, black Converse, your fringe parted in the middle, drinking a lemon soda from the vending machine. The side of the cup was a melting iceberg, the beads of sweat it raised running together into rivulets. Your profile was not the least bit different from the photo you'd uploaded to the dating app. To you I was a passing indulgence of the summer, a thing to throw off the tedium of the days between one term and the next. But to me you were not that. You were the riddle, and you were the answer. Though I don't know whether I was right.

You turned your head, recognised me, and edged a little to the other side of the bench.

"Is this your first time in Taiwan?" That was the first thing you asked me.

"How do you know I'm not a local?" You were the one who spoke first; you plainly had no way of knowing my accent.

"It's a mainland vibe."

I laughed. "What's a mainland vibe?"

"If I could explain it clearly, it wouldn't be nearly as interesting."

That convinced me, so I answered your first question. “Yes, it’s my first time. Could you show me around?”

Sure, you said. Tourists always go to Taipei 101, the Palace Museum, Ximending, or the coastline. I said then I don’t want to go to those places. Please take me to the places you usually like. And more than the sea, I prefer a bank with a river flowing past it.

You took me to National Taiwan University. At the gate you showed your student card, and my expression didn’t change, so it was you who asked: “How come you’re not the least bit surprised?”

“Surprised by what?”

“I thought you’d say something like, how can a student from a good school still be out on dates.”

I let out a snort of laughter, what was this, like a high-schooler? “Can’t students from good schools date? And anyway, by the QS rankings, my school is better than yours.”

“What ranking?” You looked puzzled.

Nothing, I said. I didn’t say that this best university in Taiwan couldn’t crack the top fifty of the QS world rankings, because I knew that, apart from people from mainland China, no one in this world cares about world rankings. No one else, when it comes to schooling, to employment, even to dating, must forever compete against a crowd of peers who graduated from schools better than yours.

Down the centre of the campus ran a very wide road, and on either side of it were azalea bushes that had bloomed already and were now wilting. The withered flowers, sinking into the soil, a funeral in pink and white. Behind the bushes stood two towering rows of coconut palms; I had never seen tropical plants so lush, so tall.

“So this is the legendary Palm Boulevard?” I asked.

“You know this road?”

I nodded, and said my favourite writer had graduated from this school; she had once written in a book: *“Let’s not be here. Come back with me to eighteen, hide under the azalea bushes on the campus, don’t let fate find us.”*

“What’s so good about being eighteen?” you said. “I think now is better.”

I gave a small mm, and said I too thought you were better now. Twenty-one and twenty-four are two different worlds. I couldn’t say which was

wider.

Whether I was better now, you never asked, and I never said.

Leaving the campus, you took me by MRT to the Tamsui River. On the way we slipped naturally into talking about our studies; I told you about my time studying psychology in Montreal, and you didn’t ask, the way most people do, why I’d gone from China to Canada, what was different about studying abroad — you only said wow, and asked whether that meant I could guess what you were thinking.

“Psychology isn’t mind-reading,” I said, “and I think believing you can guess what others are thinking is a kind of proud complacency.”

By evening the river had been burnished bronze by the setting sun; I hadn’t expected an island this small would have a river so wide. The bridges in the distance were like lines in an ink-wash painting, more like the classical China of people’s imagining than the bridges of my hometown.

“Why do you prefer rivers?” you asked me.

“I don’t know, maybe because a river gives me a kind of safety,” I said. Do you know the idiom about Lord Ye and his love of dragons — Lord Ye always thought he loved dragons, but when a real one came he was afraid. My hometown faces Taiwan across the sea, and I used to think I loved the ocean deeply. But the first time I went out on it I was terrified; the boat pitched on the boundless currents, and that blue force was so dreadful, able to lift me up and able to overturn me. Before, when a plane hit turbulence I would be frightened, and my father told me the plane wouldn’t fall, because a plane is a ship in the sky. But it was only on the boat that I understood: a ship, then, is a plane on the sea. I am afraid of all things boundless and unfathomable. A river is different, though it murmurs and flows, drifting without end, it always has banks, clear and steady banks.

“Mainlanders seem very fond of saying ‘getting ashore.’”

I was a little surprised, that was a term that had only become popular on the mainland in recent years. “Do you know what it means?”

“The literal meaning?”

“Of course not,” I said. “Getting ashore usually means something has succeeded. Getting ashore in the gaokao means someone has tested into the university they wanted; getting ashore in the job hunt means someone

has landed a job; getting ashore in matchmaking means someone has finally found a partner and married."

"Hold on," you broke in, half-amused, ". A river has only one bank, how can a person keep coming ashore?"

I burst out laughing, and even as I laughed I felt the absurdity of it, but still I explained: "There's no help for it, we mainlanders simply have a great many banks to climb."

"And what if you just don't go ashore?" you asked.

I pointed at a boat on the river. "Drifting."

"And after you're ashore?"

"Getting ready to climb the next bank."

"And after you've climbed many, many banks?"

I fell silent. "I don't know," I said. Maybe the banks are endless. A person must sit exams, find work, marry, bear children, work until retirement, and the children must sit exams again; maybe there is only one true bank, which is to live the life you actually want; or maybe, as far as life is concerned, there is no true bank at all, and what people pursue their whole lives is nothing but the illusion of being ashore.

"Have you thought about what you want to do later?" I asked.

You shrugged and said, in a tone of no consequence, "I'll think about it later."

When you said that, time slowed all around me bit by bit, like watching the turning of some impossibly distant planet, where because of the distance, all motion congeals into a mesmerising calm. Calm ought to be a thing to fear; in the world I came from everyone seemed to live by "hands stop, mouth stops," as if to halt, to be still, even for a brief and unknown moment, were an unforgivable thing. But when it settled on you it was so untroubled; on you, later was simply later, not something looming and close at hand, not something to be made clear and understood at once, but something that could be suspended, that could simply be waited for.

As night fell the sky began to rain. The river quickened. The typhoon was drawing near; perhaps we were already at the edge of the cyclone. The weather bureau had issued a warning: because the track had turned, the typhoon would make landfall earlier than forecast. You had nothing on you but your phone, no bag, no umbrella, not even a power bank.

"Do you want to come back with me?" I asked. "My hotel is just nearby."

You said OK. By the time we got back to the hotel the rain outside had grown heavier; the already pitch-black sky turned more overcast still, and the street lamps spread into blurred haloes in the misted rain.

"Tonight should be when the rain is heaviest." After we'd washed up, the room hazy with steam drifting out of the bathroom, I agreed you could sleep on the other side of the double bed — just don't come over.

"By tomorrow morning the typhoon will have passed; you can stay here until the rain stops."

You smiled. "You seem to know a lot about typhoons."

"You don't think only Taiwan gets typhoons, do you?"

"But most typhoons pass through Taiwan first. It's not fair. We're like your shield." You pretended to complain.

You made me laugh. "But a typhoon strong enough will gather its strength again over the sea after it's crossed Taiwan, and then make landfall a second time. Do you know Doksuri?"

"I remember that one," you said at once. "Classes were cancelled for two days. The wind shattered the glass in our house, and the rain outside was so heavy it was like a god ladling water to wash himself."

"That year I was already studying in Canada. I'd finally managed to come home for the summer, and then I ran into that very typhoon. My plane barely landed through the wind and rain; all the public transport had stopped, driving wasn't safe either, and I was forced to spend a night stranded at the airport. When I landed my jet lag still hadn't worn off, so I just stared at the raindrops sliding down the airport's enormous floor-to-ceiling windows, and they ran all night, drying only when the sun came up, leaving water-tracks dark and pale on the glass. When I finally got home the next day, many of the trees in the streets had fallen, including the one outside my window that I loved best, lying across the flagstone path of the compound. But apart from me no one grieved for it; people climbed over its thick trunk one after another on their way to work, like a scene from some black-comedy film."

"It sounds like the two of us are bound by fate," you said, coming close, speaking into my ear. "The wind that broke our windows also blew down the tree outside yours."

I gave a faint smile, and in the smile was a sorrow I hadn't even noticed

in myself. Your arms came around me, and yet in that warm embrace I felt a loneliness. The winds we had shared were perhaps more than that one; we had very likely been rained on by the same rain; we had surely looked at the same moon of the same eighth time zone. We were in the same world, but we had our separate lives. Then you bent your head and kissed me.

A wetness I had never felt before enveloped me. If I told you this was the first kiss of my life, would you laugh at me? A girl of twenty-four who had never been kissed. From my middle-school years I had watched my close friends fall in love, and then prayed in secret that those entanglements and tuggings would never happen to me; but I don't want to admit that perhaps at times I longed for them, perhaps I longed even for the violence and the hurt.

Your lips left mine gently, and you bent to lick softly at my neck; your fingers pushed lightly at my waist, then crept little by little under my clothes, and then you took my breast into your mouth. My body stiffened for a moment, but you didn't stop. I was thinking: what am I supposed to do now? Should I make sounds of pleasure? But I felt nothing very strong; I was even bewildered by this infant-like act. After another while, a strange tingling crept like a vine over my whole body, and some part of me was woken by a touch like an electric current, yet still I hadn't worked out how I should respond.

Into my mind floated the sexual-consent questionnaire my university had handed out, those yes-means-yes questions that circled round and round.

Does consenting to a kiss automatically include consenting to having one's body touched?

If the other person stays silent throughout the sexual contact, may consent be presumed?

If a person consents at first but says during the act that they don't wish to continue, may the other party still continue?

No. No. No.

Still I kept silent, stalled in a kind of blank innocence. To respond would be like condoning a violation. But at the same time I secretly hoped you would go on, perhaps because of everything I'd been through with you that day, perhaps because I was already twenty-four and didn't want to

be silent any longer whenever my friends spoke of love and sex, and so I couldn't bring myself to break it all off and launch into a public-education lecture for you on what consent is. I remembered my best friend telling me about her first time. "He asked whether I wanted to, and I agreed, but that was because I didn't yet know what I was about to face. Soon the pain shook my will, and I said no, but he didn't stop; I felt the strength of his legs, and I wanted to use every theory I'd ever read to convince myself that in that moment we were still equals, but my body told me it was not so."

I didn't want to fall into that kind of place, so I spoke first. It isn't only that you want it, I can want it too. It isn't only that I consent, you should consent as well.

"Can we do it?" I asked.

You seemed startled. "You want to do it?"

"Don't answer me right away. I want you to think about it seriously."

"Do you know I've never done it before?"

"Then maybe we won't manage it today." I tried to follow with something light. Watching you fish a condom out of your wallet.

"Why do you carry this around with you?"

"Attract wealth." An answer no Chinese person could argue with, and so I turned my head to the ceiling, and waited.

"Fuck, it won't go on."

For no reason I let out a breath, not knowing whether it held more relief or more regret. The wind outside had been picking up, blowing through the gaps in the window with a whimpering howl. And through those bouts of whimpering you spoke, again and again.

"*Do you want to lick it?*" The third time, you brought yourself right up in front of me.

I thought of the marble lazy Susan turning slowly on the round table at the New Year's banquet, an electric movement in its base, and if you listened closely there seemed to be a faint humming. All my life, whenever a big dish turned to a stop in front of me, my mother would ask: *Do you want some? Do you want some?* Maybe I did want a little, but I couldn't bring myself to say "yes." Those dishes turned round and round, again and again, in the space of neither wanting them nor not wanting them. I wouldn't reach out with my chopsticks, and so the next time that plate came around, my mother would quickly pick up a piece and tuck it into my

bowl: "Have a taste, it's quite good." And then, with a reluctant, careless air, I would eat it.

That was exactly how I felt now. Maybe what I really needed was for life to give me an answer, to give me clear and steady banks on either side. To give me a life that turned to a stop in front of me, arrived already chosen, needing neither my consent nor my refusal.

So I got off the bed and sat on the carpet. The bedroom's air conditioning was turned up high, and a chill ran along my spine. I faced your half-erect sex, the first time I had truly seen one. I ran my fingers around the ridge beneath the head, then nudged the tip. The fine lines of skin there had a rough, frosted texture. As I sucked, I thought of the multivitamin gummies I often ate, so like what was in my mouth now in feel and in shape. From the corner of my upturned eyes I looked at you: your eyes were closed, and now and then you let out a soft contented hum. I suspected I saw in it a kind of pride, because a man's pride is always so easy to tell. This scene was no different from the ones I'd watched in films, heard from my friends' mouths; I had caught up with everyone else's story. For an instant I felt satisfied, but still I knew this was not what I really wanted.

The saliva on the skin quickly turned cold, and suddenly I didn't know why I was here. I stopped, tilted my head up to look at you, and at last said, one word at a time:

"I don't want to lick anymore."

Your hand rubbed up and down your own sex; I stared at the swollen head, tracing the blue-green veins, until fluid swelled up out of the distended skin. Outside the window the typhoon howled, but I was certain that this time it blew across me alone. The white fluid surged out twice, running down the belly to the legs, like a small volcano erupting.



POETRY

Amy Bennett

The collapse of the myths I learned as a child

After Shelley, after Coleridge, after Tennyson, after Blake, after, after, after...

The vast and trunkless legs of stone
stand in the slum district of New Dubai;
Lizards burn, curl from lack of shade,
scrabbled over by starving ants
in a desert dead and raw, lifeless
things among lifeless things.

In Xanadu, the pleasuredome
attracts a thousand souls a day
and Alph, the sacred river, runs
sick with cans and crisp wrappers.
Visitors complain there are no salmon
left for them to catch.

The lotos-eaters have long since traded
lotus seeds for fentanyl.
Their purple hills are bruised with smog.
Hateful indeed, the grey-clad sky,
stained by factories where they twist
flowers into pain and loss.

The tiger's fearful symmetry
can only find safety inside a zoo.
His forests are gone, his stars gone
out, no man nor beast for him to hunt.
They call it charity while they take
tourist money to feed him.

I close my book and look outside
at squares of dirt sold as gardens.
As the rain sets in, more acid than
wine, I look for some new legend,
some hope that we might still believe
that magical places can still survive

Quantock rain

Will this rain fall forever? I carried it
with me when I went. I brought the surplus
from Crowcombe. Wrung out the gorse,
poured out the rhymes to help me slip away.

At ten, I thought myself alive. I ran
on beaches where spray-flecked air tasted like tears
and grockles clogged the roads, taking over
when it's hot and dry, and

and all they leave is cold and damp and stage-flat
joy. And the rains followed me, splattering, seeking,
spilling between the fibres of the plywood box
I never asked for.

The decades pass so quickly. One foot sticks
so add another. I pulled and fought
until I caved, called the mud home.
It felt close enough.

At thirty I lay caged on the hills and asked
for a way to leave. The trees gave shelter
but no answers, while the rain, sweet rain,
busted the latch, as life-slick calls to life,

I grabbed the pure water, dragged
it north. I left the salt, left the bogs and brought
Quantock rain for Northern streets. I'm pretty sure that
no-one saw. That's okay.

Now it runs down ginnels and skips along lanes
and coats the city in sea-less spray that
sends out a call of real joy, a song
of rebirth.

Bryn Williams

Memory

After Natalia Ginzburg

You raised the sheet to look at his face
and kneeled. You kissed him, how you did;
but now with your hair armouring his face,
as it was, but more tired. His suit, the same,
his shoes polished, his hands limp
which once took yours in them and drank.

Today, only today, time is draped in this sheet.
After; you can walk along the streets but
no one is there. The road isn't yours,
neither is the city; it is for the smoking,
leaning, reading, eating, well-lit men.

But you can reach out of this window –
the gates of men are locked so refuse them.
Desert youth, how overgrown it has become.
At night, dance through the weeds your life.

Daffodils

Plot still, in a way unseen since
the farmer passed, his son gone. Barriers,
a fence, more air than wood. Receding
further, as an idea, into the wake. Feeble,
translucent first, furious – plants seeding
themselves silly: propagate, die off, a cycle
of grudges, a new crop thickly sewn, another
airborne. Daffodils close then dandelions,

daises further away, buttercups. All there before
the topsoil comes away. A mole writhing through
an excavator's grasp. Parkless kids watch on.
Pine instates order behind wire trappings. *Grow,*
grow, ye fuckers. The workers will want shade
more than anything this time next year.

Handkerchief

It would sit, with the ruffles of bed linen
drying in the breeze, weighed down by
the sum of its four knots or in the heat
of summer, the stick of sweat. It smelt
of him, in that way. As a man about his tasks,
when I'd receive it scrunched to my nose.

But it was one of the last things to go. As
his dentures, wedding ring and wallet were left
on the bedside, it remained folded and tucked.
I think of it as a last social means. A mumble
of an offer as his palm opened to it folded there.
A preservation of himself after himself – and now

perhaps, an ice floe, drifting through a sea
of black, resting. What is scattered and lost on
a ruffled centre. No, no; too easy. I see it sitting
beside the hob mottled with grease. His wife
humming to herself through the blistering of fat
and setting her fish slice on it, from time to time.

Little Hulton Woodlands Hospice

He said MI5 were out the window and that
was that. Turning from the scene,
he set down his watch and glasses, rubbed

at his eyes and accepted the pleas of his wife
to come to bed. An inverse Orpheus. She
watched over him as countless times throughout

the night, he'd return to the window to focus
on the bushes across. In this black, propped up
by one elbow, she became unreal; as did

the bodies of the family portrait separating them.
How the sluggish animal of habit sunk its teeth
and she set to work on a baby outgrowing

its crib and he, his staring. Through it, she was
forever propped, obliquely, calling in shadow. And he,
dissolving what was behind, to focus on the bushes.

A Teenage Spaceship is sewn to the sky

After Bill Callahan

When I'd return to the night's stitched darkness –
I was beautiful. Wheels tucked, doors locked,
windows offering light back to itself, I'd hover –

then move – fast, silently, whipping past
whipped leaves. Darting through narrow passes
to ripple the water beneath. I was the earth's moon

child safe in the abandon of night, imposing myself
only through these quiet tugs back to the ether. As
snow falls into open sea and dismembers; I

wanted to fly towards the light of the moon's
garden and lose what of myself gave way. Every
thing was sky. Until it wasn't. Until our small radiances

would open and day would come to reaffirm hidden
things. My body. Its space. Dogs barking. The slow
motors behind sounding their place, chuffing along.

Devarya Singhania

An Ode to a Corny Metaphor for Love

Oh this rose, lily & yarrow bunch.
They all smell of the same musk –
the wet mud ill with dead earthworms,
rotting, bitter.

Tell me,
in this western cold carrying acid in its stiff clouds,
ridden with the beautiful ashes & blood
of my grandfathers,
does the rain fall down on blossoming zinnias?

You, in the west,
looking on –
cut away your jasmines.
Stuff each petal between your teeth,
suck the pesticides into your gums
& let them bleed.

Maybe if I'd plucked out a magnolia from a garden,
watching the bee die encased in its petal withering,
squishing the buds till the insect's faintest sigh,
& made you all smell the citrus,

I'd keep myself warm.

Your blood suffocates their stems,
the leaves don't curl around your chipped nails,
— & if they still give you love, take them out of my hand.

Dear Ex With White Fragility, A Sonnet

I just did my taxes, & thought of you.
My money's gone to your government, & these fuckers you call nationalists,
with putrid skin, sicker each minute,
your cousins, fathers, these pale men with onion breath,

are they saving your country?
Why do you carry that knife?
You worship their flag & in silence, let them march on –
what good is that thing if they won't cut them?

Why does a pistol also rest in your back pocket?
It glistens as the moonlight kisses its nozzle,
& punches my kind iris. Who is it protecting?
You bow before all false virtues, you invisible fascist fuck.

Go ahead. Shoot me all you want, & ransack my skin.
These idiots will decay, & I guess you were always one of them.

Jacob Broughton-Glerup

Sous Les Pavés, La Plage!

I bought these leather shoes a little while ago
and I thought of your obsession with well-made goods:
a strong stitch count, a solid seam, a quality sole;
how I'd let you down with this dainty pair.

Skin-thin, and sickly slight,
I knew then that you could see the lines of my feet
as the light shone through my soles.
You watched your son with each enduring step
feel leaves crack through his arches.

Those gravel stabs. That sticking grass.
Cobbles curling the exposed flats of my body
around them. Forced to heel to concrete and stone.

For below paved streets is the freedom of the sand
where my feet sink further and further down
into thoughts of you on Henne Strand
hobbling along in your hard-nosed boots,
your tar leather boots,
your rubber skin boots,
your resoled boots,
waving with a soft stroke of the hand.

Recycling the Roses

The roads here are straight and flat, unwavering in their commitment
to taking you where you need to go in the dulllest way possible.
I am driving still at a steady pace, going no faster than the limit allows.
I've a climate control I keep fiddling with and my right foot keeps nudging
the accelerator, a slight twitch I can't quite get rid of.
I have been driving consistently on the straight and narrow
for two-and-a-half, nearly three years.
I've a boot-full of bottles and cans. Bin bags filled with recycling to take
to the machine at that Løvebjerg somewhere up the road. I'll get my receipt,
and use the petty change to buy your flowers.

The roses. The roses.
These cheap, brittle roses
are bleeding me dry.
All I can hear is
their squat petals rustling
against their stiff
plastic wrap, a faraway cry
from the backseat of
the family sedan
you drove on your way home
past Scandinavia Park,
gliding past the border
alone in the dark.

We'll lay you down now
with a fistful of roses;
a garish, scarlet.

In a way, I'm glad
that they taped up your
limply open jaw.

She did a great job,
the undertaker. Although
she was quite awkward.

I suppose I would
be the same if I were in
her red line of work.

A red line under
her every move, as she plays
with red-raw hands.

I thought I could see
her blush when she struggled to
open the hearse door

revealing cleaning
products in the side panels.
But now, she's driving

slowly away. And
we are following you up
that straight, narrow road.

En Hyggeligt Samtale På Dansk

I can't stomach anymore cake
as I'm still digesting my rotten
vowels; my round-nosed consonant
misshapen sounds of my father-tongue.
A dumbing flick of ums and ahs that
urgently roll around the wet arch
of my mouth. An endless, expanding
count of syllables withering the tips
of my lips as the base of all meaning,
at once, all falls out.

I'll pause.

Take a break, and with tea wash it
down. That gurgling, spit-bubble
Norse in my mouth.

Faggot Tree

You, drunken, teenage metal-mouth, brace,
face me under the Faggot Tree, named
for its branches that hang – a limp wrist.

You smell of Lynx Africa, boy, and
taste like spiced rum and coke. I enjoy
the five inches of firmness you poke

me in the leg with as I choke on
this lovesick feeling mum likes to call
hormones fizzing in my groin. I ask,

Me? Really? Under the football chants
coming from our mates in the distance.
They can't see us, but it's haunting how

from far away they sound daunting now
that I've had your hand on my fluffed dick
for the past five minutes and I want

to play music that soars in those soft
American movies. I'd choose it
over the loud swell of blood pumping

from the vein in my forehead shaped like
a root going underground to chew
on the gay earth and grow long, limply

to shield us from a boot to the ribs.
Our friends can't know of your curious
fingers – you'll pretend to be pissing.

Come to my house at some point, my dad
is still missing, and my diary has
your name lassoed in a ballpoint heart.

The Fan Mail I Hope to Receive in 40 Years:

I was listening to your poem on
 my phone, Ariadne's thread tied around
 my bellend, a sexual appetite
 dragging me longingly towards the park.
 Neon light fractalling across my specs,
 all rain-spotted and steaming up with a
 cartoon horniness, I wandered, soaking
 wet through my jeans, my all-consuming need
 for snogging internet men in the dark
 guiding me to faggotry. *Faggot Tree*

was the name you gave the canopy of
 willow leaves that, carefully, sheltered you
 from hetero stares in an imagined
 circumstance: your teenage-self kissing a
 curious lad who confessed all to you
 on a breath ripe with rum 'n' coke doubles.
 My pubescent brain clung to that poem,
 magenta, mad, gentle, fumbling its way
 through rotating doors and stained-glass windows –
 now I'm here, cruising parks at 3 AM.

50 Seconds of 2007 Makes Me Cry

I'm pixelated and toddling, a four-year-old fractal
 singing through a tin can at the bottom of a well
 and all two megabytes, groovy and (once upon a time)
 new-fangled, bring tears to my mother's green eyes
 like onions or chick-flicks or babies or funerals.

It's the kind of happy-sad they call nostalgia,
 when the entire world exists in a two-mile radius
 and novel phonetics cartwheel in your mouth.
 The video starts and it ripples through us
 like water or ice-cream or sand dunes or space-time.

What a coincidence my hair is now pink,
 like the girl on TV I'd embody on that table,
 my boy arms reaching towards diamante stars
 in a Kanekalon milky way. My dad would lose sight
 like eye masks or blind folds or peek-a-boo or cataracts.

It's the kind of happy-sad they call realisation,
 when the body bends towards child-like reflection
 and the number three reminds you how toddlers
 draw butterfly wings on sheets of A4 paper
 like artists or vandals or cave men or taggers.

Two Lads, 23 and 24

He was twiddling his thumbs in the pub at ten-thirty,
waiting for him to walk in any second now.
Twelve? Still nothing. Thumbs? Still twiddling.
One-thirty and he was lost in the black of his Guinness.
He put down the newspaper, seeing a lookalike in an article
and after losing a quid under the foot of another bloke,
he was left with one pound for a lonely man.
Alone in his booth, he thought about his lifestyle:
nights on his knees in cubicles, bending over in alleyways
for strangers in the dark — then his mate sat next to him.

His dread went down easy like he did in the ginnel,
this pretty boy opening his gob to tell him:
av wun 60 quid on a scratchcard, mate. You wana head?
There was a notion between them that it was nice to be
young, good-looking and sexy, tension between them
soon fizzing over like a bottle of champagne shaken,
They went to a hotel frequented by cruisers and
in their room they did lines of coke, quoting John Waters,
downing lager and saying *Stella Artois* like it was posh.
When the cans laid empty and the bag had gone up their noses,
they were thrilled to find that neither had whiskey dick:
mate, Ah think Ah luv yew, yknow? Am slurrin ma werds...
And our guy felt the same way, the wait all seeming worth it.
Four in the morning and they were screwing with the lights on.

Lior Klein Stern

A short visit

Marta's apartment is small
in an old soviet building
block. It smells of fresh
laundry and herbal tea –
awaiting someone to come
and sit at the table while
she bakes. Books and posters
inhabit the living room.
Crumbs and fruit and metal pots –
the kitchen. Picture of a son
on the fridge, no curtains. Only
pine trees shield the windows.
Marta asks me how I slept and what
makes me feel safe and the
meaning of my dreams. Driving

to the forest in her silver Toyota,
one hand on the wheel, the other –
a tarot card. She takes me
to get water from the well;
a pump in the parking lot
outside *Arturówek*. Emptying
a vase of old water, Marta cleans
the dust off her car, saying *dobra*,
you're blessed now. Walking
around, she shows me where
the Ghetto used to be. Her laugh
surprises me and so does her sadness.
When Marta cries, she cries
like my grandpa. *It's Alchemy*,
you see – turning tears into gold.

Nightmares; September '57

All faces are old in my dreams.
Hands are wrinkled, bones brittle.
All the faces I know – strangers

in my dreams. Friday night,
and I'm sitting at the empty children's
table. My baby sister is short-sighted

now, cousins losing teeth. Friends can't
remember... I am the only child
left in this city. Walking in the crowd
of elderly, I keep missing the entrance

to my house. When I wake up, my room
is packed in boxes. Parents wrapping
silverware, folding winter clothes – this city
would never know me as an old man.

In Hebrew, Breast and Demon are spelled the same

Juliet was a year older than me
when they made her into a statue.
I met her in the garden underneath the balcony,
the summer Dad took me to Italy.
We celebrated my Bat Mitzvah,
but I was not a woman yet.
In our family-friendly travel guide, I learnt
that putting a hand on Juliet's left breast
would grant me good fortune.
In the garden, her chest shone –
fool's gold against bronze
skin, bronze eyes, bronze sealed lips.
She was taller than me
when they made her into a statue.
One bronze toe peaking beneath bronze hem,
one bronze heart. One narrow waist.
I had put my hands on her
as Dad took a picture with the small
silver camera I got for our trip.
Look now at my blushed-out skin,
my empty eyes, my sealed lips.
No good fortune, just an uneven set of
demons growing with a grudge.
Poor, little, Juliet.
Had she also felt ugly, her first time with a bra?
Had she also felt strangers' thoughts
lingering over her body?
Leaving their mark, in fool's gold.
I wish I'd whispered
in her bronze ear: *Please don't die*
like women whispered in mine
almost every day of middle school.

How to speak Polish

1. *HaGeffen 5, Bat Yam, 2004*

It is no more home
than it is a disappointment. My body
is shrunken beside the kitchen
table, eyes unable to see
the ceramic bowls against
the formica. Yet my hands
are determined to finish peeling
those apples. Forgive me
Chemdati, for I will not meet
you in Łódź. I don't need a Valley –
my bones grow dry on their own.
I accept this room, where the salted
air of Bat-Yam preserves
my body. My Polish is gone
and Hebrew I never had. You may
keep the jewels, but please
bury me with books,
to remind me of childhood.

2. *Stefana Jaracza 15, Łódź, 2024*

I sneak through the open
gate, searching for Polish surnames
I can't pronounce. Standing in
your old courtyard, deciding
where grandpa, your son, rested
his bicycle against a wall is
too much. I can't uncover all;
dry furniture, prison cells,
diaries. Your city's frost burns my fingers
when I touch it. But the people's
hands are kind like yours
used to be. Their eyes are safe like
yours. And their smell –
warm like yours. The people
are your people, yet when they speak,
their language is not our
language. After all, this is no more
home than it is history.

Dirt

In Tantara they found another brothers' grave,
and near my parents' house they built a new Temple
upon ashes of fallen cemeteries. Try not to think
about the dead, when soldiers single-file

children in the school's playground.
Little eyes stare from torn-out paper
as soldiers shift yellow lines in yellow sand.
Little eyes mirror what they cannot forget.

And that soldier is my neighbour
and my cousin, and my brother,
and the dirty worshiper of our folktale.

O High Holy Days, Horrible Days, how
we've Ashamed and Betrayed and Cruelled
and Damned and Erased this land.

In Jewish tradition, the Viddui (confession) prayer is read ahead of and during Yom Kippur, the day of atonement. The prayer is constructed by abecedarian verbs. The final stanza of this poem refers to this ritual.

Robbie Barlow

Love as a Hedgehog

It's crepuscular, fumbling
between shades of night
burrowing from the corner of the garden,
with walls and fences as reliable defences
for anyone wanting to keep it out.
Then it retreats from the noise of the domestic
nesting in its dew-laden grass blanket.

It observes us with its nostrils and ears,
spending its life practically blind,
armed with seven thousand spines,
coiled like a withheld breath
to the size of a fist
at the slightest raised voice.
But gentle hands that know their way
around the legs, stomach, and face
will avoid each quivering quill,
though even a hoglet flinches
from an unfamiliar touch.

You may not see it during winter
when everyone's shut indoors,
but on a spring morning, if you're patient,
you might catch a tiny twitching nose
poised towards you, taking you in
as you take it in,
as it gambles its trust
despite every reason not to.

Appendectomy

Plugged in, wired up like a piece of equipment,
I declare my loose teeth, my maxilla complexities
before potential intubation.
Carted down corridors, onlookers smile me through.
I'm labelled with icy ECG pads
and my last words are in case *I don't see ya:*
good afternoon, good evening an' goodnight.

I wake as the bed swerves a corner,
my brain listing with the turn.
Three doorways, clean cut and pried,
plastic sutures cinching through me
zipping up the body I'm not done wearing.

My blown vein flares, a pink star bursting into the basin,
and morphine does nothing
while codeine keeps my head spinning,
and apparently I asked for my anaesthesiologist's number because
she's got gorgeous, tennis-green eyes,
a truth I'd never say with the lights on.

At home I'm bed-bound,
my friend cuddles me through the involuntary shakes,
her hand touching my cannula's phantom limb.
She tells me she was terrified I was
going to die,
that she couldn't stand picturing me
alone.



NOVEL EXTRACTS

Amy Bennett

AND BREAK THE FRUITLESS CROWN

Chapter 1

The first chill of autumn had left condensation that clouded the windows, but Lawrence looked out all the same, past the speckled moisture and on to the town beyond. He usually loved idly looking out at the view, but today he narrowed his eyes and tried to get a sense of how much damage the storm had done.

No buildings seemed to have been affected, at least that he could see, but he couldn't make out details from this distance. He could only just see the orchard, but the trees did look more bare. He sighed and turned around. "Don't you always plant more trees than you need, to ensure a good crop? Isn't that how it works?"

The farmer opposite looked down at the floor as he spoke, twisting his felted cap between his hands. "But, m'lord, it'll take years to get the trees back to hows they were, and we were hoping you wouldn't mind fixin' them. You know. Cursing them."

"Coercing. Coercing them." Lawrence sighed again. He hated that word for the abilities he had. There were so many better things to call it – communing, altering, honing – but it was too entrenched as a term. It made it sound so vile though, like manipulation. There was something wrong about the idea of a country ruled entirely by people who 'coerced' everything around them.

"Course, sorry m'lord. Co-urcing. Can you?" He risked a glance up at Lawrence, but quickly shied away again, focusing instead on plucking stray bits of foliage from his thin and worn coat. The last scraps fell to the rug, but the man didn't seem to notice.

Lawrence suppressed the complaints that were forming in his mind. Helping with a few trees wasn't such a hardship, really. Especially not compared to the things that would be expected of him if he'd stayed

in the capital – If nothing else, at least he didn't have to use his power to stockpile enhanced weapons and armour to act as a deterrent to his family's political rivals. The infighting and power-grabbing had always exhausted him. Finally, Lawrence nodded. "Fine. Let me at least dress and eat something for my strength, then I'll attend to the orchard."

"Thank you, sir," the farmer said, all cautious smiles now, relief clear in his eyes. It took the man a few long moments to realise that he should leave, instead standing there, his gaze going from Lawrence to the window. Eventually, after a pointed look from Lawrence, the farmer stuttered out some more thanks and retreated.

Once he was left alone again, Lawrence took another long look out over the valley. The winds had been brutally strong for a few days – enough that Lawrence had hidden inside, idly flicking through books and drinking far more wine than he should have – but the town was generally quite well sheltered. Sheltered from both nature and man, mercifully.

He turned back to his desk and rang a small bell. With the chimes still echoing off the carved wood panelling, he strode to the side and opened the door that joined his study to the bedroom. He shrugged off the thick woollen housecoat, letting the chill of the morning bite in, and he quickly grabbed the fresh clothes that had been laid out for him. He pulled on layers of soft, fine linen and woven wool, all well-fitted to him. He heard footsteps approach the other room, followed by a woman's sharp voice saying "Good morning, my lord?"

"Ah, good, Sarah. Bring me some breakfast, won't you?" Lawrence raised his voice to half-shout over the sound of him changing his clothes.

Appraising himself in the mirror. He wondered for a moment if the outfit was too much, too grand, with its delicate embroidery on the hem of his shirt and the decorative smocking on his trousers, but he convinced himself it was fine, even if it was more of a city-lord style. At least this way he would strike a proper image when he arrived at the orchard to fix their problems – quite unlike how he must have looked in his nightclothes.

When the housemaid delivered breakfast, Lawrence barely looked up. He was sprawled across his chair with his feet up on the windowsill, facing towards the town, which was one of his favourite views from his manor. He nodded his thanks as the maid set down the tray, and let her retreat before turning to start his morning feast. Thick ham, lightly fried.

Eggs and greens scrambled together. The smell coming off it was savoury and rich. There was bread, too, though not as fresh as it should be. He made another mental note to remind Sarah to remind the cook to keep on top of the pantry. He helped his townsfolk enough that he deserved fresh food at the very least.

It was a good hour since the farmer had left. Lawrence donned the fur-trimmed overcoat he kept by the door, as well as the close-fitting boots that would keep out any dew from the grass, and started to make his way down from the house. The walk was always pleasant at least, especially if he stuck to his lands and skirted away from the other houses.

Once past his grounds, the neat gravel path gave way to dirt and stone, kept flat by delivery carts and servants as they came and went. He passed the road into the town proper, looking down it with some idle intrigue, but everything looked the same as ever – quiet, peaceful, discreet. No-one even looked his way as he passed.

The orchards were on the far side of the town, where houses gave way to farmland and the productivity of the countryside. Lawrence tended not to venture that way too often, except when he was needed. He was much more interested in the woods or the river that spread the other way, where he could hunt or fish or just enjoy the weather on warm days. The town and the farms were too busy for his liking.

Closer to, he could see that the orchards were worse than he assumed. The winds from overnight must have hit here harder than they'd hit the manor. Several trees looked worse for wear. A few workers – young men who were joking and laughing as they did their chores – were stooping to recover the small green apples that had been scattered to the grass below.

"Ah, m'lord! You made it, thank you!" The farmer beamed. At least out here, someone being trained in coercion was rare enough that the townsfolk were incredibly grateful for his help. It ensured he was always well-received wherever he went in the town.

"Let's get started. Get a couple of men and hold the branches in place for me, will you? It'll make it easier." He could get the branches to reattach themselves from the ground, have them rising up on their own. It would look much more impressive, but it would take more energy.

The farmer nodded eagerly, and quickly waved over the others who were still scrabbling in the undergrowth for their finds. They dumped

piles of small, hard fruit into baskets, and started trying to manhandle branches into place.

With the first branch ready, the farmer turned to look hopefully, almost pleadingly, at Lawrence, who had leaned himself up against the rough stone wall that enclosed the orchard. He nodded and strode over to the tree, nudging the others out of the way slightly to get himself in the best position, hands against the bark near the place where the branch had snapped off. “Hold it still,” he barked.

The rough wood underneath his hands was cold and damp from lying on the ground, but he could tell that it hadn’t been too long since the branch came loose. There was still that sense of life in the wood, that tiny little flicker that all living things feel, though growing weaker in the split.

Lawrence closed his eyes and felt down deeper, pulling his own glow of life into the tree to feel it properly. As he did, it was like his senses grew, seeing the strands that ran through the tree and feeling the ground beneath him breathe. He could even feel the farm hands who were trying to keep the branch steady, though he suspected they could not sense his probing. While every living being – and most unliving things too – had energy in them, most of them could not engage with it properly, could not mould it and move it and become familiar with how it worked. Most people were blind in this version of the world.

It was only the work of a few minutes to coax the tree’s energy to reach back out for the branch, and the branch’s internal flame was keen to link back to the whole, being so recently severed. It was like two tendrils, seeking, flailing, cut and shivering, until he guided them back into joining. They touched, they danced, and suddenly snapped back together. Then it was just a case of giving a little bit more of his own energy to help the break re-form and the wood reform back into one beautiful grain pattern. That was the slow part, getting the splinters to knit back together and become one piece again – though, to Lawrence’s slight annoyance, the break was still visible as a line of paler wood. He used to be more skilled than that. He was out of practice.

There were no more than a dozen trees all in, but most needed multiple repairs, and by the end Lawrence was starting to get tired, as well as bored of communing with trees. The fatigue bothered him more though, bringing the start of that hollow feeling in his chest where the coercion

had drained him, that quiet nothingness that was so exhausting to carry. A few years ago, he could have done the whole orchard without any issue, but he was struggling. The farmer didn’t seem to realise that though. That was the other side of living in a small town. People were impressed and grateful when he did his thing, but none of them really knew what it was, or what it took out of him. Sometimes he missed living in the capital, if only because people back there at least understood what it was like to use your own life energy to shape the world around you, how bloody exhausting it could be.

He ran a hand across his brow, wiping the few specs of sweat off. “Well, looks like you’re all done now. The apples should ripen normally.” He nodded to the farmer, who was smiling. The other two workers were already turning to get back to picking up windfall. “If you’ll excuse me, I need to go and–”

“Ah, well, actually lord, if you don’t mind, while you’re here, you know, I’ve got a cart where the wheel splintered badly, and it’s a bit past what I can do with a hammer and nails.”

Lawrence groaned inwardly. Working with living things was easier than working with lifeless things, and he was already feeling the strain. In the capital he’d been pushed to expand his limits, but trying to explain those limits to a farmer wouldn’t do much good. He nodded reluctantly. He probably had enough strength left, and it might not be a bad thing to stretch himself a bit. “Fine. Lead the way.” The farmer guided him around the back of the farmhouse and into a barn. The whole place looked like it could use fixing up, honestly, with holes in the roof and one door hanging off its hinges at a sad angle, but Lawrence was not about to offer his help for that today.

“She hit a hole in the road, see, and the wheel almost bust apart,” the farmer said, pointing to the stricken cart.

Sure enough, the cart was lopsided where one of the wheels had been removed. The wheel itself was in a sorry state, just about held together by the strap of metal around the outside. Several spokes were clearly broken.

Lawrence waved the farmer away and hunched down on the balls of his feet, careful not to crouch into any dung or other muck. He could only hope his coat wouldn’t get the worst of the experience. That was another reason he missed the city – much less muck.

Reaching inside his own consciousness, he pulled his energy up towards the wheel, where his hand rested on the cold metal. If things were alive, they generally wanted to stay that way, which was why healing was one of the first things you learned to do. Fixing inanimate objects was tougher though. They didn't always know what they were. They didn't have any great pull to be a certain way. Trees grew, birds flew, people... well, people were complicated, but they still wanted to be whole, physically. Wheels, however? Wheels were more confused. Still, he could feel the shape of it, the flame of old life that had been pumped into it, kept going by the years of use that the cart had seen. He could almost see it, trundling along the farm track, even venturing out to the nearby market town once or twice. That was it, it needed to travel again.

He was focusing so hard on the spokes and the struts and the splinters that it took him a while to hear the yell coming from the front of the farm, followed by footsteps getting closer. Then, from close behind him, he heard someone shouting 'Lord Colhill? Lord!'

As his attention wavered, the wheel, which had been creaking back into a neat, strong shape, started to fall back into its damaged state. In his surprise, it was all he could do not to accidentally rip the thing further apart. He swore, standing up suddenly and spinning around, eyes sharp. "Don't disturb someone when they're working!" he snapped, his voice acidic, towards a young man who was framed in the light of the barn doors.

The boy almost recoiled, and out of the corner of his eye, Lawrence could see the farmer move slightly towards the lad, looking protective.

"Sorry, I'm sorry my lord." The boy's words were hesitant, shaky. "But there's someone at the town looking for you. Said they couldn't find you at your house. They look important."

Lawrence forced himself to count to five, trying to cool his anger and avoid scaring the boy too much. Still, when he next spoke, his voice was a growl. "What do you mean they look important?"

The boy withered slightly under the question. "Uh, they've got a few knights with them, sir. And the man, he's in a proper fancy coat, with... well I think it was the royal family's sigil on it."

That was enough to make Lawrence's anger freeze, shooting from burning temper to an icy flash of fear. "And they're looking for me? Did

they say why?"

"I think, uh..." The boy shuffled his feet. "They said they're looking to take you to the capital."

Lawrence felt the cold anxiety run down through his arms, and for a moment he felt unsteady on his feet. His gaze unfocused. He hadn't really meant it when he thought about missing the city. It was just idle thought, he couldn't really go back...

D G Holden

THE GUEST HOUSE

1

March 1989

If you had told me a few weeks ago that, tonight, I would be standing in front of a stranger in my stocking feet, fighting back tears, I would not have believed you.

I had arrived in the village of Whitewell only two hours ago. Although dusk was falling, I'd expected to see someone – a postman finishing his rounds, a child heading home to supper. There was no one. Not even a dog sleeping in a doorway. A cobbled road led out of the village, past a crooked row of cottages and a coaching inn. I swung my rucksack onto my back and followed it. I needed to move quickly if I was to get to the house before dark. When I reached the church, I pulled the dog-eared directions from my pocket. They took me up to a fork in the road where a track disappeared across open country. I stopped to rest. A curlew's mournful cry broke the silence as it skimmed low over my head before circling and alighting on the spire behind me. I imagined how I might appear to someone painting this landscape – a lone woman, small and insignificant beneath the vast skies and the endless expanse of moorland ahead. A pitiful figure, undoubtedly.

I set off down the track. The rain scudding across the fells, worked its way through my coat, sticking the shirt beneath to my skin. It was my mother's coat, and I could smell her faintly underneath the earthy scent of the moors. I pulled it close. The track was rutted and rough underfoot

and the straps of my rucksack dug into my shoulders as I trudged on. My stomach gave a hollow rumble, and I pictured the sandwich I had left on the kitchen table at home, rushing, fearful that I would miss my bus. I sighed, regretting refusing the offer to pick me up from the village.

At last, the ground fell away and I saw the house, crouched in a valley, a grey stone Victorian monster, its roof bowed like a witch's back, mist coiling around its edges. The wind lamented around me, and in that moment, I wanted to turn back. I looked around, but dark clouds had closed in and swallowed the village. My chest tightened as I started down to the house. I slipped almost at once, putting out my hand and just saving myself from tumbling to the bottom. I reached the gravel drive, the crunch of my boots sounding unnaturally loud. Above the entrance, a weathered sign that read *The Guest House*, hung from two rusty chains and rasped against the porch roof. Blank windows looked down on me as I stepped up to the door and knocked. A startled swallow darted from the porch, its tapered wings scything the air, and vanished into the eaves.

Nobody came. I stood back, closed my eyes and waited. I had nowhere else to go.

When I opened my eyes, the door was ajar. I pushed it and stepped inside. It closed behind me with a click. I slid the rucksack from my back and let it fall to the floor. As my eyes adjusted, I could see that I was in a high-ceilinged hallway, the walls panelled in dark wood below peeling white paint. Beneath the smell of furniture polish was a mustier scent, of damp and decay. Heavy double doors stood on either side of me, and ahead, a wide staircase rose to a leaded window that cast a column of pale light into the hall. From the window, the stairs curved around to a landing lined with several closed doors. It struck me that this would be the first night I had spent away from my mother's house. I wished I could tell her about my journey across the moors. I saw myself describing how I had stumbled down the hillside and tried to imagine her laughing the way she had before she was ill. But I could no longer picture her that way.

I saw her then, standing perfectly still in the shadows of the landing,

her hands in front of her as if in prayer. She came down the stairs slowly and stepped into the light. She was old, as I had expected, and small with a slight stoop. She wore a flowered overall and her silver hair was tied up in a loose bun. We stared at each other.

'I'm Clara.' The sound of my voice, echoing in the stillness, surprised me.

'My dear.' My knees nearly gave way as she came towards me and took my hands. 'Goodness, you're drenched. Come away in, and let's get you out of those things.' She spoke with a lilting Scottish brogue. She helped me out of my jacket and my fingers tightened around it for a moment.

'It's okay, lassie. You can let go.' I released it with an unexpected sense of relief. She hung it on a coat stand by the door where it dripped onto the stone floor. I bent over to unlace my boots.

And so, here I was standing in my socks, curling my toes to hide the holes. I was twenty-five years old and had nursed my mother for seven years without shedding a tear. And now for some reason, standing in front of this woman I had never met, I wanted to cry, like a child, sniffing and sobbing.

'Come with me, dear. Let's get you warmed up.' I followed her through the double doors to the right into a corridor that ended in a warmly lit sitting room. Inside, a sofa and an armchair were arranged around an electric fire lodged in the grate of the fireplace. The mantelpiece above was crowded with figurines. There was a sideboard, below a window facing out onto the garden, on which a vase of pink roses wilted. The air was heavy with their sickly fragrance. In the corner, a television flickered on and off. She crossed to turn it off and gestured for me to sit down.

'Let me have those damp socks, dear,' she said. I sat down in the armchair, pulled them off and she draped them over the fire. The bars fizzled and gave off a stale smell. She took a blanket from the sideboard and gently tucked it around my knees. I had been worrying for days about what I might call her. In the end, I just asked. She let her hands rest gently on my knees and raised her eyes. They were the same green as my father's.

'Grandmother,' she said softly, 'would you call me that?' She had an endearing dimple when she smiled.

I allowed myself to sink into the chair and relax. *Grandmother...* I had worried calling her that would feel awkward, instead I felt less alone.

'Thank you,' I said, 'for taking me in.'

'Och, away with you. You're my granddaughter, I cannae see you out on the streets now.' She stood up and put her hands on her hips. Her smile faded.

'I'm sorry, dear, about your mother,' she paused, 'she never answered my letters, you know... after your father passed.' I did know. I'd found her letters among Mum's things. At first, I'd blamed her for keeping me from my grandmother. But I realised that, after Dad died, something broke and she'd kept me from everyone. She was only trying to protect me. For two weeks, I had done nothing about the letters. I wasn't sure that Grandmother would still want to hear from me after all this time. Eventually, I plucked up the courage to call her. She had been shocked, of course, but glad to hear my voice. When she invited me to stay, I was touched. More pressingly, I needed somewhere to go whilst I worked out what to do next. I had no job, no friends to speak of, and I couldn't make the rent.

We sat in silence. I could see that she was uncomfortable talking about my mother and it hurt. They say grief comes in waves. I have found it more like arrows – sharp stabs of pain carrying memories like the fletching. I remembered often the night she died. She'd called my name and I'd felt my way down the dark hall to her room. The door was open, a pink scarf draped over the bedside lamp, giving the room a pulsing warmth like a sick heart. She had vomited into an enamel bowl, and the stench had almost overwhelmed me. I'd emptied it in the bathroom, and gagged as I rinsed it and water from the tap splashed vomit out onto my dressing gown. I had put the bowl back and returned to my own bed, leaving her staring up at the ceiling. There were no meaningful last words, no precious final moments of connection. As I lay waiting for sleep, I'd felt only resentment for what my life had become. In the days that followed, beneath the numbness, there was relief that it was over. And devouring all of that, guilt that I'd let her die alone. I dug my nails into my palms.

'I would have come if I had known she was sick,' Grandmother said

finally. I didn't reply. It didn't matter now. She was studying me, her brow creased and her face full of quiet concern. I managed a hesitant smile. She returned it.

'You must eat something.' She pushed herself up from her chair and left the room, returning with a tray of tea and scones.

'I made these last night.' She poured me a cup of tea and my tears welled up again. It was wonderful to have someone care for me for a change. I got to my feet to help her with the tray. She waved me away.

'Sugar?'

'Yes, please.' She put a spoonful into my cup, spread a scone with jam and cream and passed it to me on a side plate. It was laced with raisins and I took a bite. She looked at me expectantly.

'Delicious.' A satisfied smile spread across her face.

It was so warm in front of the fire, and my eyes grew heavy. I dozed fitfully. When I came round, I was alone. My eyes drifted around the room, as I tried to make sense of my surroundings. I pushed the blanket aside and stood up. My head swam, and I sat down again heavily. The fire had been turned off, and I shivered. I picked up my socks. They had dried stiffly but were still warm. I put them on. Steadier now, I went over to the window and looked out. The rain had stopped. It was dark now, but I could see wisps of mist drifting over the garden in the moonlight. I went over to the fireplace and picked up one of the figurines from the mantelpiece, a curtsyng lady holding her long skirts in one hand a fan in the other, her porcelain face frozen into a perfect smile. Mum would have hated her.

I drew in a sharp breath. Behind the figurines, was a photograph of my father. He was sitting on a bed beside a girl in a plain black dress and was younger than how I remembered him. I gazed at the girl wondering who she was. She looked a lot like me. I examined the photograph for a long time then kissed my fingers, tapped them to Dad and put it back where I had found it.

I hadn't heard Grandmother come in.

'Sorry, dear, I didn't mean to startle you. I'll show you the Guest Parlour, and then I'll take you to your room so you can get settled in before dinner.

We always have dinner at eight.' She moved back towards the door and waited there, expectantly.

'Yes, of course.' I followed her into the corridor, and she pointed out where the kitchen was. Back in the hallway, I stopped by a console table with a visitors' book and a telephone that I hadn't noticed before. Grandmother placed her hand flat over the book when my fingers reached for it. I let my hand drop to my side.

'Och, we don't get many guests this time of year.'

She turned on a standard lamp at the foot of the staircase and it burst into colour. The carpet was deep red and the fittings on the wooden balustrade polished brass. She opened the double doors across the hall and we entered a long room with floor-to-ceiling mullioned bay windows to the back and side of the house, faded curtains framing dark shadowy views of the moors. In the nearest corner, was a wooden bar with two pumps and several dusty bottles of spirits. In the middle of the room, concertina doors had been pushed open and beyond lay a dining room with a long, wooden table that would have seated around twelve people. The same swirling carpet ran through both rooms.

Above the fireplace, hung a bevelled mirror and I looked into it. My pale, heart shaped face gazed back at me, my mousy brown hair hanging in straggles around my face. Behind me, another mirror hung on the far wall of the dining room, reflecting my face back again and again into a long tunnel, each version of me smaller and dimmer than the last, until I seemed to disappear into the bowels of the house itself. I turned away, feeling dizzy. Seated in a low armchair in the bay of the dining room window, his back to us and his head bent over a newspaper, was a man in an ill-fitting suit. He was all elbows, shins and long wrists like a grasshopper. He didn't turn, although he must have heard us come in. Grandmother brought her finger to her lips.

'That's Mr Grimshaw. He likes quiet whilst he reads the newspaper.'

I nodded, bringing my own finger to my lips.

'Where are the other guests?' I whispered.

'No other guests.'

She led me back into the hall and closed the doors softly behind us. I climbed up the stairs after her to the bedrooms. There were several shelves set along the landing holding a jumble of books and on the walls were numerous cheap prints of country scenes. There was a large vase on a stand in one corner which appeared to be decorated with dancing Romanesque figures, but when I looked more closely, I noticed their hands clawed the air above their heads as if they were drowning.

'That was my mother's,' she said grimacing. 'Ugly old thing.' I wasn't sure whether she meant the vase or her mother and suppressed a giggle. 'This house does have its idiosyncrasies,' she said, glancing at me sharply. 'These are the guest rooms. Mr Grimshaw is in number three. My room is also on this floor.' She paused. 'In case a guest needs anything in the night.'

She opened a door set back in the corner of the landing to reveal another staircase. 'Your room is up here.' She led the way up the steep narrow steps to the attic rooms. I couldn't put my finger on what, but there was something off about the dimensions up here. She turned on the light and stood aside to let me into a room with a sloping ceiling and a small window that looked out over the roof. It was simply furnished with a single bed, a bedside table and a wooden dresser. The walls had delicate sprigged wallpaper, which sat uneasily with the solid furniture. It seemed familiar and I realised it was the room in the photograph of Dad and the girl.

'Alright, dear?'

'Yes. It's lovely.' It wasn't. I felt uneasy.

'Dinner is at eight,' she reminded me. 'We are in bed by eleven and up at seven.'

Before I could offer to help with dinner, she was gone.

My rucksack was leaning against the end of the bed. It was heavy and I was puzzled how she had managed to bring it up all those stairs on her own. Perhaps, Mr Grimshaw had helped. I shuddered. I didn't like the idea of him being in my room. I rested my hand on it taking comfort from its familiarity. The day had a feeling of unreality. I had only been here a short time, yet the walk from the village felt as if it were a lifetime ago. I

lifted the rucksack onto the bed and began to pull out my things. My shirt was still damp, and I changed into a T-shirt and hung it over the end of the bed. I put my alarm clock on the bedside table and arranged my books on the dresser. The top drawer was deep enough for most of my clothes. Everything else I put in the next drawer down. Afterwards, I lay on the bed. The silence was deafening, no sound of water in the pipes, no wind in the rafters, none of the ordinary creaks of an old house. It felt as if the house was holding its breath. I thought about the girl in the photograph with Dad. Had this been her room? I didn't know her, yet I felt close to her somehow. I think she had found it lonely here too.

The bed was soft, but it was cold. There was a draught coming under the door. I pulled the blanket up to my chin. Then I got up, tiptoed to the door and turned the key in the lock. Back in bed, I pulled the blanket over my head. I never did that at home. I closed my eyes, I would rest them just for a minute. I didn't want to be late for dinner.

Ella Hilbert

THE OTHER DAUGHTER

Chapter 1

The hotel loomed above her, its pale stone exterior and tall windows looking down on her in silent judgement. Ivy felt her shoulders hunch involuntarily. Around her, guests flowed steadily up the stone steps and through the large mahogany doors.

She dragged her gaze down towards the invitation in her hands. She read it again. And again. Over and over until the words blurred together and lost all meaning.

You are invited to the wedding of Mr James Hart and Miss Madelyn Fox.

Madelyn Fox. Three weeks ago, this name meant nothing to Ivy. Then an Instagram request appeared on her phone and suddenly she had a half-sister. Three weeks later, Ivy stood outside of the enormous hotel debating whether she should have rejected the invite and stayed home.

After all, two decades had passed since her mother had abandoned her and her father for another man. Two decades of absolute silence. Two decades of lying. And then suddenly she decided to tell Madelyn the truth?

But, why now? Was it just because Madelyn was getting married? Did she not want any secrets between them? The questions were relentless in Ivy's mind, chipping away at her sanity like a wave against a cliff face.

And the idea of seeing that family, the one that her mother had traded her for...

Ivy's breaths were suddenly far too quick, dark spots encroaching on her vision. She turned abruptly and headed for her car. She couldn't do this. What the hell made her think she could do this? The notion sounded absurd now. She stopped to lean on a tree, forcing slow breaths in through her nose.

Wait. She was being ridiculous. As the sprawling fields opposite the hotel came back into focus, she realised not going wasn't really an option. Not if she wanted a relationship with her sister. Which she very much did. Even though the word felt foreign to her, like something borrowed that wasn't really hers to keep.

Her mother had robbed her of a lot, but she wouldn't rob her of her sister. At least not more than she already had.

So, Ivy did what she always did: straightened her spine, pasted on a smile and pretended that nothing was the matter.

* * *

She slipped through the entrance, the scent of lavender drifting to her nose immediately. The low murmurs of conversation flowed throughout the hallway as everyone migrated towards an expansive function room with a bar at the far end. Her heels tapped loudly against the marble floor, every footfall creating a resounding echo, and she cringed, silently cursing herself for wearing stilettos. She didn't want to draw any attention to herself today, but these shoes practically announced her presence like a drum roll.

Once inside, the children ran straight to the plush velvet seats, pulling out iPads and talking animatedly amongst each other, whilst the adults walked leisurely around the room, greeting each other with a hug or a handshake, beatific smiles on their faces like they were being reunited.

Ivy didn't think it was possible to feel more like an outsider.

She hovered in the corner of the room awkwardly, hands clasped in front of her to keep them from noticeably shaking. She tried to hold her head high, but she felt like she was back in secondary school waiting for someone to invite her into their group to talk.

But then as her gaze travelled the room, she found a woman standing with her back against the bar. Her hair caught Ivy's attention. The same shade of chestnut brown as her own, except it was smoother, straighter. Tamed in a way Ivy's curls had never been. She recognised her from the pictures her dad had kept of her. As a child she had been obsessed with them. Sneaking into her dad's room to look at them whenever she could. Her favourite had been one of her mum holding her as a baby. It must've been Halloween because she wore a pair of cat ears atop her head and her bright blue eyes looked adoringly at a baby version of Ivy in her arms. Naturally, every Halloween from ages three to twelve Ivy had insisted on going as a cat.

A handsome man with salt and pepper hair to match his stubble stood beside her at the bar, leaning in close and reaching for her hand. Every few minutes guest after guest would stop to speak with them, and Ivy watched as they gracefully accepted hugs and kisses on the cheek.

She felt her hands ball up into fists. There was something deeply unfair about the sight of them, content and comfortable together, like there was no karma in the world.

The woman in front of her hadn't changed much. Her hair was the same, though the roots had softened with grey and it only reached her shoulders. Her skin was paler than in the photo, like she avoided the sun now to protect her skin. The corners of her eyes and mouth now had permanent wrinkles, but they were subtle. Claire Fox had aged well. If nothing else, at least her mum had given her good genes.

Although it was unsettling how similar she could look to a woman who was practically a stranger.

A phone rang from across the room and Ivy flinched. Claire relinquished her husband's hand to answer it. Her eyes widened and she whispered something to her partner before speed walking out of a side door beside the bar.

Ivy shook her head at herself. She shouldn't have been so intrigued by Claire. But after spending most of her life wondering about her mum, she found it very difficult to stop now.

The thought of talking to her made a layer of sweat form on her palms. She wiped them onto her dress and groaned when another layer formed almost immediately. But she couldn't keep the curiosity from moving her legs towards the same way Claire had exited.

She emerged into a cloakroom; rows of jackets hung neatly on clothes rails. To the right was a staircase that curved upwards towards the hotel's rooms. At the top of the stairs stood Madelyn. She started walking hurriedly towards her mum.

"Careful, my love, you're going to trip on your dress," Claire's voice was laced with laughter.

"Don't laugh at me!" Madelyn exclaimed but she was laughing too.

Ivy watched them from the doorway. She meant to turn away but found herself stuck. It was like morbid curiosity in a way. She didn't like what she was seeing but she couldn't quite bring herself to look away either.

Claire stopped short. "Wow," she said. Although her back was to Ivy, she heard the emotion in her voice. "You look so beautiful, sweetheart."

She really did. Her hair fell in loose blonde waves down to her hips, like she'd just stepped in from the beach. White lace hugged her figure before flaring out at the waist, flowing to the floor and extending behind her to glide gracefully as she walked.

"Awe mum. Don't cry! You're going to make me cry!" Her warm brown eyes were already shining with tears. She fanned them, trying to stop them from spilling.

Her steps were light and relaxed as she sank into her mum's arms and let her hold her. Claire pulled her head back, cupping Madelyn's face in her hands before leaning in to plant a kiss on her cheek. Madelyn pulled away, giggling, her mouth agape in mock outrage as she reprimanded her for almost ruining her makeup.

Ivy found herself staring at Madelyn. The way she held herself was so effortless, shoulders relaxed, hands gesturing freely, never seeming to overthink how she should move. Whereas Ivy's stayed locked at her side.

"Do you have my lip gloss? I put it in your bag and forgot to grab it off you before you went to greet everyone." Madelyn said.

"Let me go have a look. I left my bag in the other room, I'll be one sec, hun, stay here,"

Claire turned around and headed down the steps. Headed towards Ivy! Her heart started slamming rapidly against her chest.

She needed to move.

Right now.

A second later and it would be too late.

Crap, it was too late. Claire had stopped in front of her, seemingly frozen, eyes roaming over her.

Ivy was counting on the safety of obscurity. It had been over twenty years, she couldn't possibly recognise her.

"Ivy?"

Fuck.

Madelyn must've shown her pictures from Instagram.

Ivy opened her mouth to talk. Nothing came out.

Every impassioned speech she had imagined giving, every snide comment she'd wanted to make, every question she had desperately wanted the chance to ask, disappeared. Her mouth suddenly felt too dry. She tried to swallow and it was painful.

Claire stepped closer to her. Ivy automatically took a step back.

"Ivy? Is that you?"

Instinct took over and she turned around and fled.

She hurried through the door nearest to her, slamming it shut behind her. She pressed her shoulders firmly into its wood, until she was sure no-one had followed her. Slowly, she stepped further into the room, taking in her surroundings.

Dozens of brightly coloured gift bags and neatly wrapped boxes were stacked on every available surface in the small storage room. They made her feel claustrophobic, which was certainly not what she needed right now. Then, a smaller item caught her attention. A little black box. She didn't have to think hard to guess what was inside there. Even so, she found her fingers moving toward it, folding around the velvet texture, and prying open the lid.

There they sat, two wedding rings, tucked within the cushioned interior.

The sight of them brought her back to her childhood home. To the wedding ring her father kept in his bedside drawer until she was eight. Of course, that one hadn't been real gold like these were.

She remembered sitting at the table, her knees tucked to her chest, eyes stubbornly straining to read her book by the dim lights of the kitchen. The hand of the clock moved past dinnertime, then past bedtime, but she remained glued to the table, waiting for her dad to come home. He'd never earned much money even before when they had her mother's paycheck to help keep them afloat. With just him, he had to pick up extra shifts and work overtime just to keep a roof over their heads.

He hadn't been able to afford gold rings, but this family clearly had no issues when it came to money.

Suddenly the opulence of this hotel made her feel sick. Claire had not offered a penny of child support, and her dad had been too stubborn to request it.

Something that, if she was being honest, she resented him for. Of course, she could understand why he would be hesitant to ask for it, determined to prove that he could do it on his own. But that money was hers too. Maybe she wouldn't have so much debt from student loans if he'd asked. Ivy was willing to bet that Madelyn didn't have any.

She found it hard not to feel jealous of Madelyn. They were only a few years apart and shared the same mother but little else. The fancy hotel, the expensive rings, the Instagram posts that Ivy had scrolled through late at night, pictures of family holidays and Christmases. It just seemed like her life had been untouched by uncertainty. And the worst part was how close that life had been to being Ivy's too.

A voice sounded from outside the room, startling her. She had been gripping the ring box so hard her palm had dents in them. She let her grip loosen and it fell.

Her heart sank.

She held her hand out to catch it, fingers brushing the velvet mid-air, but ended up pushing it further away.

It hit the corner of a table and the rings flew out.

One hit the carpet but the other...

It fell onto the edge of the windowsill, the metallic clang ringing in her ears.

It spun in circles as Ivy lunged for it.

"No, no, no."

Too late.

The ring vanished through the open window.

She let out a string of expletives, cursing her clumsiness and bolted out of the room, flinging herself out of the building and onto the grass. Frantically, she began dragging her hands through the blades, digging into the soil, sending specks of mud flying all around her.

Her hands were raw and dirt was buried beneath her fingernails, when finally, Ivy sank back onto her palms. It was useless. It had disappeared, swallowed by the endless fields.

Chapter 2

Ivy sat in the grass, her thoughts spiralling. Great. Fantastic. She hadn't even had a proper conversation with her sister in person yet, and now the first one they'd have would be Ivy telling Madelyn that she'd ruined what was supposed to be the happiest day of her life.

She put her face in her hands.

"Are you searching for something important, or trying to plant a vegetable garden?"

Ivy's eyes widened, mortification and panic competing for control over her expression. From her position on the ground the sun blocked her view of his face. She only managed to catch sight of his tuxedo and lavender boutonniere, marking him as one of the groomsmen.

Well, this was perfect. Caught red handed by one of the principal members of the wedding party.

"Well, the weather's perfect for it, so I thought, why not?"

He chuckled warmly and the sound brought goosebumps to her arms. He reached a calloused hand out to her and she took it, allowing him to steady her as she brushed the dirt from her dress and rose to her full height.

As she was hauled to her feet, she felt something beneath her heel. She glanced down quickly.

Gold.

The ring?

Without her glasses she couldn't be sure.

But then the metal glinted in the sunlight.

"Oh my God," she let out a relieved sigh, clutching her chest.

She bent down to pick it up.

"Are you okay?"

"What?" She looked up. "Oh. Yes. Sorry, I just," she searched her brain for something plausible, "there's a stone in my shoe."

She laughed nervously, as she scooped up the ring, hiding it in her palm,

gripping onto it so hard her knuckles turned white. He held out his arm for her. "Thank you."

"No problem. So, are you a guest of the bride or the groom?" He asked.

"The bride."

"Ah," he nodded. "How do you know her?"

"I'm her..." she paused. She really didn't feel like revealing the whole complicated backstory. "I'm an old friend," she lied.

"Right." He muttered, a smirk playing at the corner of his lips as though he wasn't fully convinced.

Her eyes found the ground for a moment, like it could offer her some assistance in escaping this conversation. "How about you?" she said, deflecting the attention back onto him.

"Oh, I'm the best man," he smiled, chest puffing slightly.

"Ah, that explains the boutonniere," she pointed at the purple flowers gathered on his lapel. "This must be a stressful day for you, then."

"You have no idea. One of the wedding rings just went missing. I'm out here trying to find it."

She felt a blush creep up her neck, the weight of the valuable band in her hand growing heavier with each passing breath. What should she do? Confess? Admit to everything? No, she couldn't do that. This was her half-sister's fiancé's best friend. Everything she admitted would get back to Madelyn.

She gingerly extended her hand out, opening her hand to reveal the precious objects in her hand. "I think... I think I might have found it." She mumbled, cringing at the obviousness of her lie. Her palms were

damp with sweat, the rings nearly slipping from her grip.

Fortunately, he was too stunned to notice. The tension melted from his shoulders, his features softening as he let out a deep sigh. "Oh my God," he breathed. "You actually have found it!"

"You're a hero..." he said, pausing, waiting for her name.

"Oh, I'm Ivy."

"Well, Miss Ivy," he said, grinning. "Old friend of the bride's, you're a goddamn hero. Your story must be told. To the hotel!" He lifted one arm with a theatrical flair, and used the other to grab onto Ivy's elbow, dragging her through the gardens and into the building.

"Wait!" It came out more of a mangled whisper than something resembling English. The breath left her lungs as she was whisked away, stumbling after him, steps hastening to keep pace with him.

Her stomach twisted itself into knots at the thought of meeting her half-sister for the first time. Sure, they had exchanged text messages, chatting comfortably across screens, but she was still gearing herself up to meet Madelyn face to face. She certainly didn't want it to be under the pretence that she had saved the wedding day, when in truth it had been her careless actions that had almost ruined it.

But this man was persistent, with a strong grip. He jogged ahead, barely breaking a sweat, oblivious to her panic.

When they arrived at the entrance to the bridal suite, Ivy was winded. She was still struggling to consume enough oxygen for her lungs when three knocks reverberated through the hallway, startling her. Glancing to her left, the best man's hand hovered by the obscenely tall door, an amused smile playing on his lips. She managed a half smile in return, though it didn't quite reach her eyes. Truthfully it was closer to a grimace. She had just enough time to ponder how likely it was that she'd faint before the

door clicked open.

“Theo!” exclaimed a bubbly voice.

“Hi, Maddy, you look beautiful.” Theo replied, fondly.

Eustacia Feng

WORRY-NOTS

* * *

I remembered. I cut my hair recently. Sakura and I went together, in fact. We walked downstairs from the flat we lived in and turned down an alley, then a side alley. A shabby shop appeared in front. The blue and red barber's pole no longer spun. It got caught in a fixed frame of a yellowing photograph. The small shop had glass slide doors that squelched while opening. Red characters were taped stroke by stroke onto the front of the door. Chang Le hairdressing. Wash, cut, blow dry. Here and there, a dot or a line got peeled off somehow. The remaining skeleton of the characters tottered lopsided. A woman in tight jeans holding an unlit cigarette slid the door open. She reached for her back pocket to pull a lighter out. Then, catching sight of us, she paused.

‘Well, aren't you coming in?’ she asked.

The inside smelt fresh and citrusy. A three-bladed fan whirled on the ceiling. We might have been the first customers of the day. Sakura had insisted we come early. She couldn't sleep. On our narrow bed she had flung her arm over me and weighed on me so badly that I started up too. The shop might have just opened. The clock on the wall showed it was barely past 8.

‘Which of you cutting? Both?’

‘Both,’ we said, then tried to smile at each other.

‘Why don't you sit down already then?’ the woman clicked her cigarette box and lighter onto the glass table in front of a mirror. She grabbed a spray bottle from the table then marched to the other end of the small shop to tug down two capes hooked to the wall.

‘Which of you first?’

Sakura murmured, ‘You should go first.’

I thought she looked shy and uncomfortable. 'You don't have to cut yours if you'd rather not.'

'No,' she shook her head firmly. 'I want to.'

'I'll go first then,' I said to the owner. But she had already finished draping the caps around both of us and was in the process of spraying water all over my head.

The shop would be no bigger than 5 or 6 square metres. About the same size as the room we rented. A small strip of the far corner ceiling slanted downwards. Underneath it was jigsawed a stool and wash basin, and a small cupboard where an electric kettle jiggled on top. From the mirror, I saw the room in reverse. The walls were covered in posters of Hong Kong celebrities from the 90s. Their reflected image appeared oddly deceptive. Nose skewed the wrong way or a mistaken eyebrow raised. Right-to-left characters spelling 斗室, 呂宋, 鬚髻 and other well-known titles estranged themselves. In the midst of the posters hung an imperial calendar, where the date and dos and do-nots bore red imprints on the white page. Sunday, March 4th. 12th of the second month in the agricultural calendar. Tomorrow would be the Waking of Insects. I wondered if today was an inauspicious day for haircuts. Perhaps that explained the quietness in the shop.

The woman asked, 'Where did you two come from? Are you students?'

Sakura said, 'Yes, we go to Hui An High School down the main road.'

'Ah,' she said, 'that place.' She tutted as she dragged a comb through my knotted hair. 'You want this cut how?'

'Short,' I said, 'just short.'

'Just short,' she repeated. She leant across me to snatch up a pair of scissors. 'Well, you said it. Don't lay it on me if it turned out you're not happy how it turned out.'

She ran her scissors without pausing across the back of my head. 'You're from the school you said. I thought the students from there carry books everywhere. Eating, pissing. I swear they read in their sleep too.' I laughed uneasily. And she said, 'Don't ask me how. I say you guys just close your eyes and had entire exams done by the time you opened them.' She finished the first cut with a flourish and flung all my loose hair onto the floor.

I didn't feel much like talking. Neither did Sakura by the looks of it.

From the corner of my eye I saw her withdrawn into herself. Her glasses lay in her lap, and she looked asleep.

The woman rambled on, 'I had a boy come in once, just wanting a razor. He was 15, 16. Anyway, younger than you. He came carrying a school bag and guess what, pulled out a book of foreign vocab this thick. And I told him, "You won't need that," I said, "I'd be done in two minutes." And he said, "I can't waste two minutes. If I wasted two minutes every day that'd be 50000 my whole life." She snipped off a tuft jutting out on the side of my head. I wondered if her hand shook while she got excited, as I could swear my hair didn't look right. But she seemed to see no problem. Continuing, she said, 'I stared at him, and I thought, you little kid. You live till sixty first then you come tell me. I'd likely be in the graves then, but you come to my grave and tell me, and I'd listen to you then. Of course I said nothing. I just gave him a good shave. All the while he had this book open on his legs. The razor buzzed quite loud, but you could hear him, chanting out words like mad. "pub pub pub 酒馆酒馆酒馆 pub pub pub 酒馆酒馆酒馆 delighted delighted delighted" damn, his mouth worked like an autocannon. Faster than I can razor. I said to him, "You know what a pub is?" He didn't seem to hear. In two minutes I shoved him out and basically ran off as fast as he could. Can't waste more time, I suppose.'

The woman took a deep breath, 'but I thought you all are like that in that school.'

'We're return students,' I told her, 'we failed the Exam last year.' In the mirror, she rounded her mouth into a big 'O' but I could see she looked confused.

'Do you still go to the school then?'

I said, 'Yeah.'

'Do you live there?'

'Not this year.'

She didn't ask more, only patting me on the back. 'You're done,' she said, then turning to Sakura, 'what do you want? Short too?'

My reflection looked odd. I couldn't quite find the cause but was sure my hair looked messier than ever. I reached for a comb on the glass table in front of me. Then all of a sudden I couldn't be bothered. Whatever. My hair was gone. I looked the floor where they lay swirled in pools. What would it be like to stuff them back into my body? I choked, fighting back

the urge to cry.

The haircut cost us 10 yuan each. Heat blasted onto our face when we walked out. Sakura hooked her arm through mine and started pulling me to the direction homeward. 'We still have to do laundry,' she said, 'we're running out of soap and oil too and we need to be back at school by 1.' She seemed to be on the verge of tears and I stopped her.

She turned misty eyes onto me and stared in silence. There was nothing I could do but pull her into a hug. Her body went slack the moment I had my arms around her. 'It's alright,' I said. Her head weighed on my shoulder and she smelt fresh and citrusy like the hairdresser's.

We stood thus, squeezed thin among yellow walls which boarded the old neighbourhood. After a while, there came from the end of the alley the weathered voice of a man through a loudspeaker.

Rat cage. Rat trap. Rat glue. Cockroach killer.

I said to Sakura, 'let's go for a walk in Riversouth. Flowers are in bloom. All the way to the horizon.'

Recycle old iron pots. Iron pans. Stainless steel buckets. The voice stuttered and there was a recognizable cut before it started anew. It must have been pre-recorded. Alongside it the sound of wheels grated against cobble, growing louder and louder. From the shadow of a low palm a bicycle emerged. Attached to its back on either side was a large and heavily looking sack that seemed to be made out of grey hemp. On its back was no old man, but a short and thin woman with greying hair. As she approached, I saw that her bike seat had been specially adjusted as to make it possible for her legs to reach the pedals. To grasp the handles her arms had to stretch straight. Even so, her body twisted and she slid half off the seat each time she pushed her foot down.

Passing us, she slowed expectantly, turning her sun-burnt, bony face up at us. Sakura moved towards her in quick strides. 'I'll have a cockroach killer,' she said. She put a hand in her pocket and loose change jingled.

The woman hopped down to park her bicycle. Then she rummaged in one of the bags behind her and handed Sakura a small red packet. The image of densely packed cockroaches on the surface made me slightly sick. Sakura shunned her eyes too. She bent down to hand the woman two coins. The woman nodded her head. I saw that beads of sweat clung

to her temples. I looked at her closely and realised she couldn't be that old at all. Her skin was not yet wrinkled. Her arms were still filled with strength. I watched as she hoisted herself back up the seat of her bike then waved at us.

Sakura waved back and I followed her. We waited as the woman rode away into the rising sun.

Sakura stood lost for a moment. Her eyes fixed to the direction where the woman disappeared. She rubbed her eyes beneath her glasses. 'Riversouth?' she let out a long breath, 'I'd love to go there but, I can't, not now.' She touched her hand to my arm again and the heaviness of her spirit loaded onto my back. 'Some other time though,' she said. 'Some other time we'll go together.'

I asked, 'What did you think of her?'

'The woman at the hairdresser's?' Sakura pondered. Squatted in the narrow bathroom, she tipped the plastic bucket over and black soap-sudded water flooded over her bare feet, which were stuck in slippers a size too small. 'She's alright. Her son ran away from home years ago. It's said he joined the army.'

'That's likely. You can't join the army nowadays unless you begged for it.'

She shrugged, 'Probably meant it as a euphemism. He was just a kid when he went. Chance some guys got him to Myanmar. I hope from my heart they didn't, but that's where people say kids disappear to.'

'I was always told kids got binned if they got too naughty. You know, back to where they came from.'

'That's funny,' she said. Water squirted from the clothes in her hands, twisted like fried dough. She rarely laughed or smiled. Only a weak huff came, which melded quickly into a sigh, 'My mum never told me she picked me up from the bin. At least I think she didn't. But somehow I remember hearing it said. Some sort of trick I guess.'

'Like a collective memory.'

'Yeah. We have it in our blood, I suppose.' She huffed again. Casually she flung a piece of clothing towards me. 'Catch.'

I did. It was a pair of pyjama trousers of hers, patterned with monkeys with overlarge heads. I shook it open. Leaning against the folding door frame, I reached behind me for clothes hangers spread across the bed.

'There's a hell load more of these, you'd have your hands full before you know it.' Sakura tried picking up the bucket by the rim. The plastic thing dragged down on her fingers. I heard a crisp crack. 'Urgh,' she said. The bucket of clothes thudded down on cracked tiles. She lifted a swollen index finger up to her mouth. 'That's why I hate Sundays.'

'But you hate Mondays more, and Tuesdays, and Wednesdays...'

'You're saying that only because you got the easier part of the job.' She stretched her arms as she stood up, inadvertently hitting the rod from which the shower blind hung. Plastic hoops clattered against each other. The thin layer of fabric rustled like porous tissue paper. The tap squelched, and the hose dribbled. 'Hand me a towel,' she said.

'There're all outside, I'd have to get them off the clothing rod. Doubt they'd be dry.'

'That's fine.'

I inched back sideways into the narrow slit that skirted the side of the bed. Holding onto the pyjama trousers, I squeezed around, past a long, slender table, until I was standing at the window side. We were on the third floor up. A steel frame extended from the outer wall, partitioned with removable rods. The setup was identical for the room below. Further down, a blue bike shed covering blocked the view. It used to be transparent, but dust and leaves had gathered, together with pollen, larvae, cobwebs, and cigarette butts chucked from the windows. The ends of knocked-over bikes poked out from the shed. Some rusty, some missing a wheel. Tarmac ground underneath, because, what else could fix broken things so efficiently as tarmac? I leant out the open window and, shoving bed coverings aside for space, flipped the trousers onto a rod. Then, picking up the clothes fork, I hooked a towel back inside. My body was suspended all the while as if buoyed up by the hot air. What would happen if I fell? I clenched my hand more firmly onto the dust-flossed window ledge.

Sakura caught the towel I flung towards her across the room. Knocking a foot against the wall, she slotted it out of her over-small slipper. After drying both feet, she turned and swung her waist backwards to slip between the small round sink and the toilet seat. 'I need a rest.' She came

around to stand close to me, her forehead touching my nose.

'It's a bit of a minefield, sorry,' I said to her forehead.

She pushed her water-sprinkled glasses up her nose. Their rims had fogged over. She touched her almost-bald head, and her face scrunched painfully. Turning away from me, she said, 'I'll take the chance.' She knelt upon the stripped mattress and chinked into a heap the hangers, the clips, the buttons of dry clothes. She rustled together exam papers and XianQu biscuit wrappings. 'There,' she said, flopping a stuffed toy penguin and a jacket together as pillow. 'You mind hanging up the rest of the washing for me?'

'Not at all.'

'I want to sleep until midnight. No. Better yet. I want to sleep twenty years and wake when the seas have changed.'

'It takes longer than twenty years for that to happen.'

'You don't know that.'

After a while, I asked, because the thought had been swirling in my mind, 'The son of the hairdresser. How old would he be now? Late twenties?'

'Abouts.' She yawned and bunched up her t-shirt so that her stomach was bare. Stretching her legs out, she tried to starfish across the mattress, only finding it too narrow, and ending up dangling half outside of bed.

'Wait,' I said to her. Something had caught my eye. I went towards the table, slimmed against the wall. It held an array of plates slumped with dry fruits and nuts, Want Want rice crackers, and an egg-cake that was my all-time favourite.

'Careful of cockroaches,' Sakura said, 'they come earlier each year, I swear.'

Not surprising, what with the heat. I tried not to disturb the food as I reached for the tip of a wooden handle sticking out behind the table. No sound of scuttling could be heard, thankfully. A musty smell surged with a cloud of dust as I pulled the thing out. It was a tattered fan made from hardy banana leaves.

'Oh yes,' Sakura murmured. 'I was wondering where that went.' She lazied with her eyes half closed, her unshaved legs patched red and brown out of the square ends of her shorts.

I gave the fan a few waves in the air and started coughing immediately.

From the bed, Sakura raised her head and looked at me with arched brows, but soon enough she started coughing too.

'You have it,' I said to her, and she shook her head like a rattle drum. I chucked the fan over to her, which made us both chocking again as it arced in the air.

'Hey.' She put up her arms in front of her face to block the thing. It flopped onto her lap. 'You know what,' she said, folding up her glasses and wiping sweat off her forehead. 'I'd rather not boil to death. Just hold your breath.'

A minute later the dust cleared. A breathe started flowing through the tiny room. From the bed, with a voice that hitched between wake and dreams, Sakura murmured, 'But her son. I think he's still alive. I hope he is at least.'

'Even in Myanmar?'

'Who knows? He might have been rescued by a nice family. Or prised himself out of iron casings of a truck, tumbled into a forest and survived on nuts and berries. It won't be much harder than surviving here.'

'You talk funny at times.'

She rolled onto her side, letting the fan heap onto all the mess. 'Feel free to sweep everything to the floor if you feel like lying down. When I wake up all will be gone. I'm still hopeful.'

'And the seas will change?'

'Yeah. Just you and me then. Our room will be the sole lighthouse for miles and miles.'

* * *

Felix Shearwood

UNTITLED NOVEL

Chapter One – Part One

Jules Long had been missing, in a fashion which Francis now attempted to resolve, for several unusual weeks.

Always obsessive, ever reclusive Jules–Francis had at least been able to rely on his boy-hood friend's weekly sojourns at their club for conversation. His letters–delivered promptly at seven a.m.–were always answered–though well into the night and often a day or so late. But since the seventh of March, some three weeks past, there had been nothing from Jules but silence.

Their club abandoned, Jules's booth sat empty for meals, his favourite chair void in the parlour, his absent presence marked upon by others for its extended length. Francis had been asked, in a manner, more than once, on whether his friend had left England for a season–perhaps to Rome to relive his Grand Tour–or perhaps Barcelona for the sea air–or even South America, as he had quite suddenly, some three years ago visited and been so excited to discuss on his return after several months. But no, Francis could not think that he had, though he had no heart to tell those poor chaps so eager for the stories of abroad, that rather Jules had vanished as some moth in the night and would not return gallant with tales, but more likely limp and sick from weeks in-doors.

Jules would arrive at the club, in such a state as to surprise the sensibilities of those old gentlemen, in just another day or so, and all Francis's insipid anxiety should be resolved. And yet, in his heart there was such a seed of it that he could not for all his strength prevent it from growing. His letters, in truth, had not simply gone unanswered, but undeliverable, Jules's door unanswered and resolute in its closure. Not a sign of life, Francis had been told, was present at his house, so as to make the place a tomb in

its empty beauty. And so Francis now found himself sat a-back a hired carriage, on the route from Harley Street to St John's Wood, that he might find the reason behind Jules's secondment from society. It was late, as his own practice had not closed until the sun was setting, and his dinner had been fine enough to stupor him for some time, but now at the turn of the clock to the ninth hour of evening, he made his way through the London streets towards his destination. The horses hooves were a steady droll, somewhat soothing to his countenance, but in his hand he held the several letters his butler had returned for failure to deliver. Their presence between his fingers reminded his heart of his anxieties, and an anger at Jules's unconscious disregard swelled in his belly. Jules had never been a good man, had never been a kind man, but together they had grown and together they had risen through Oxford and become together medical men, sharing their passions and their hardships and their love. Their love, particularly towards one whom now Francis's mind was incapable of turning from.

Adrian. Oh! Adrian. He had been of such unspeakable beauty. Together, he and Jules had loved him better than any other could possibly think to. Together they had watched him and wondered at his Adonis face, at his Narcissus thrall, thinking always of his happiness above all else. And together they had mourned when twelve-month past he had vanished, much as Jules had seen fit to recreate, on their last week of study before being turned out to the world fully-formed Men. It had been a grief all-encompassing in its unfairness, in its sudden horror, in its unresolved nature. Nothing had been heard of beautiful Adrian since, and still that unbearable wound sung in Francis's soul. Jules had leaned on his obsessions during the worst of it, leaving Oxford almost the day they discovered Adrian's unfortunate fate, and holing himself within his house for months on end, only seeing Francis occasionally and never within his own home. Francis—oh! how he had struggled. He had wandered the streets of Oxford so sadly bereft, so un-joyous in his graduation, and when he too had joined Jules in London he had thrown himself with such abandon into his work that now his practice was one of true repute amongst the many doctors of Harley Street. And yet his grief over Adrian had never healed, despite his talents in medicine, and now to think that Jules might join that injury in such the same manner burned his grief a-new and left

him a-wonder at how he might cope. To lose both—his unreliable friend and his most honest and true love—would be unthinkable. For him to be so alone, so destitute in love and friendship, was a curse he could not bear to endure. And with his dear sister Edith still wandering the world as was her passion, it would leave him alone so thoroughly that he could not think on it.

So ensconced in his woes was he, that when the carriage pulled to a stop out-side Jules's house, he hardly registered the ceasing of motion. It was not until his driver—an older chap, quite worn from years, though respectably dressed—did open his door with an entreaty of “Sir, we have arrived, if you are quite alright?” that Francis broke his mind back into the present.

“Yes, thank you,” he told the man, stepping out onto the street, and looking up-on the residence he had come to visit. “Before you leave—might you wait out here for me? I do not believe I should be long, and I should like to return home with ease.”

“Of course, sir. Please, take your time. I shall a-wait here you and return you to Harley Street when you are done.”

So he left the man to tend the horse—with a shilling extra for the inconvenience of waiting—approaching the house with something quite like trepidation in his steps as he saw his butler's words to be true. The house was dark, no lamps lit, the curtains drawn, and a strange cold air permeating the mild spring night. He had no latch-key, and the door was firmly locked, but after a-knocking for long enough to frustrate the neighbours, he looked to the windows. Though the curtains were drawn, there was a pane un-latched, letting Francis access surreptitiously into the drawing room. Francis, uncertain of what un-Holy state to expect as he had never once entered his dear friend's home, found the place quite steady, furniture fine and clean, hearth—though empty—ready for a warming fire, and no dust twirling through the air. It was well tended, which raised an anger in Francis that Jules's staff were so arrogant as to not answer the door when called. And yet, when he left the room, he found no sign of a staff. There was not the quiet bustle of those down-stairs, the polite presence of a butler to see to one's needs. But still there was no mess—no sign of Jules unattended as he should be without those to care for him. Even had Jules left the residence to live else-where, a number of maids

should have been retained in St John's Wood to see to the property and forward on any wayward correspondences, but the further he searched, the further he found nothing but silence and empty rooms. He found nothing but his anger turning to a swift, delicate dread, permeating his lungs as his inhalations found on the air a scent he knew with misfortune, very well. Quite as well, he might have said, as his own laundry, though stinking and fetid and unsuited to such a home.

For Francis had been dissectionist on many a rancid body, and so knew the smell of corpses well, and it was this such scent that he smelled now in Jules's home. His anger coupled now with fear, a sweat breaking up-on his neck and quickening his breath, and though he wished not to, he followed that foul stench towards its source. Which he found in the house's downstairs-repurposed, from what Francis could see, into a laboratory of considerable excellence. But, like the rest of the house, it was dark, and here there were signs of not just Jules's careless focus, but of a struggle also. A sallow moonbeam from a far window was the only illumination, lighting upon the mess of books and scientific paraphernalia, and amongst it all broken glass and tables pushed askance.

That smell of death was a miasma upon the room. He went further in, raising a hand not to cover his mouth or nose, but as though to shield his eyes pathetically from the body he knew he would find. He prayed, still, that it would not be Jules—distasteful, absent, obsessive Jules, his boyhood friend and only companion since the loss of their Adrian. He prayed to find Jules rather a murderer than dead—that he could excuse because Jules would be alive, and together they might resolve the crime so that his friend could re-join life.

"Jules, tell me—are you here? You do not need to be afraid for whatever you have done, it is only me, Francis. You might let me know where you are and I can help you. You must tell me what you have done and we shall fix it—we know that the police shall not look too closely if you have only killed a servant. If it was a friend—though I cannot think of any acquaintance you hold besides myself—we shall simply move the body. You shall be alright, dear boy, should you only make yourself known to me!"

Yet nothing returned to him, no fervent answer, no plea for assistance, no admittance of guilt which Francis could resolve. Instead there was only that continued silence, that dreadful permeance of certainty that Francis

knew in his heart was Jules's corpse.

"Jules, please—I beg of you—tell me what has happened to make your workshop smell like a morgue? Are you hurt? If so, only make a sound and I shall find you!"

It was quite too dark to see, that little moonbeam doing nothing to light his way, so in a fit of impatience Francis cast about for a lantern. He found one, discarded—cracked, but whole enough—and with a quick flick of a match struck it so that its brilliant flare lit up the room and with it, the horrifying body of Jules Long.

He lay, stretched, two paces over, body in full rigor, across a table top. His face, once charming, was twisted and bruised, purple and swollen, his skin already slipping to reveal the bright, raw red below. His fingers, too-arched, broken, and crooked—had bloated and split and blackened at their tips, and Francis whimpered as he stared into those white, empty eyes that did not stare back. There was blood, too—great effusions of it, dried and clotted where it spilled from his torn and rotting neck, the broken glass of a bottle still sticking violently from the wound. It had run from his eyes, also, such great pressure in his head bursting the capillaries and pouring his life-blood down his face.

Jules was dead, then, and murdered, and Francis whimpered again only to contain himself at the realisation that there was no forced entry. The murder was brutal, and personal, for Jules's body had been ravaged in a way that his home had not been. There was nothing missing, no expensive items removed from the property that might have made this a robbery. And the decomposition of his corpse spoke to some time dead—the cleanliness and sweet smell of the upstairs rooms suggested a continuation of care. All of which indicated the presence of the murderer. An interloper, then—a mad-man determined to take on the life of another, to murder and assume the life of a man well-made and independent. An anger so fresh and so feral that Francis could not call his earlier emotion anger swelled within him so beatifically that he pronounced himself Vengeance, found himself returning whence he came in search of this impersonator. And to his horror, he found not a rogue hide-away playing house in the finery of Jules's home, but a light scent of food much hidden beneath the rot of death, a faint brightening of the dark beneath a door much closed, still beneath the house and hidden from the world outside.

This interloper had not imagined to entertain life in the embrace of beautiful wealth above, but rather constrained to continue subsistence below, en-stretching survival in the house's kitchens like a rat ensconced within a wall. The sweet smell of meat, not previously available to Francis's nose for the decomposition of his friend, made itself known, flattering the air and inviting him to entrap the murderer within. He found beside him a wall-sconce, wrought iron and heavy and burned an ash-black. It would do him as a weapon, so he pushed his weight into its joint and removed it with a crack from the wall. It left a mark—quite conspicuous—but he did not care, rather depressing the handle on the kitchen door and entering with a resolute reminder of Jules's murdered face. He might have been afraid, but to give into it was to allow this slayer grace—time to escape. He had not been quiet on his entry—whomever was there would surely know of his presence and would flee if only given the opportunity. This, he could not permit.

The kitchen, when he entered, much un-like the rest of the house, was in a state of disrepair. The sweet smell of cooking was stronger, but beneath it was another, less foul form of decay—all about the place were the traces of decomposing foods, un-washed linens and the sharp smell of living, un-clean bodies. The range was lit, and a-top it a large pan bubbling with vigour, but the floor was un-swept and the counters cluttered with dis-used and rotting accoutrements. By the heat of the fire was a rumpled simulation of a bed, the sheets greyed from too-long used, and stained with proximity to the cooking. All about was the evidence of life, though one entirely at odds to the beautiful grandeur of the house above, and Francis's anger staggered. He found himself not advancing forwards with his weapon in hand, but rather pausing in the entry-way, un-able to align his theory with this evidence. To steal Jules's life and home and live beneath stairs was one thing, but in such squalor! that was beyond Francis's reckoning. He took a frightened step forwards, casting about the room for sight of this murderer, still intent—despite his reservations—on gathering his revenge, but at the sound of a soft scuffle he spun, desperate fear climbing his throat and ceasing his breath to find not some violent phantasm, some apparition of evil, but a head of dark hair clutched in shaking hands. There was a man—young but no younger than Jules had been—concealed in the corner, head buried in his knees and trembling

with all the strength of death.

"You have killed him," Francis said, himself shaking though with a greater strength than the vision before him, enough that the light of the hearth seemed to dance unhappy visions about the room. "What in God's name have you done?"

The creature flinched and cried—a pathetic snuffle that rose a foreign feeling in Francis's breast, and yet Francis could not bear to allow sympathy, to equate this beast to a man.

"Tell me!" he yelled, lunging to grab a-hold of the man's sodden, filthy waist-coat, pulling him up so that Francis might cast his light upon the murderer's eyes. He looked for guilt, for some evidence of monstrosity, but rather he found himself gasping and falling hard to the floor.

This was not some monster, some violent furore of a man warped by the torments of Hell to murder his friend, but rather the face of the long missing and eternally beautiful Adrian Smithe.

"I am sorry," Adrian said, his whole countenance pathetic and squalid, his beautiful face as equally covered in filth as the rest of him. "I am sorry."

"Good God, Adrian, what have you done? Why are you here? Did you do this to dear Jules—but why! you have hardly known him, what motive could possibly have possessed you? And to stay here in this dirt and filth for so long that you might look like the dead yourself!"

Adrian sniffed, quite disgustingly, though he did not care—the whole of him was quite disgusting.

Francis, an element of his shock now relieved, saw plainly how one of Adrian's eyes was white. His left eye, once the most luscious black, was now as a shroud and blind. His right eye, still wholly working, flickered plaintively between Francis's.

"Who—" Adrian spoke, deathly afraid, "is Adrian?"

"Excuse me?"

"I do not know of whom you speak. I am not Adrian."

"Then who might you be—you have his face!"

"I am Dorian. I am Jules's creation—and I have killed him. Oh God, upon my soul if I should have one, I have murdered the man who made me!"

Hannah Wickenden

THE GREY MAN

Children's A&E doesn't get many visitors in the wee small hours. Most emergencies happen during the day: bumps and bruises, pinched fingers and scraped knees come from play, not sleep, but there were usually one or two parents pacing my floor, spaced out from dread and lack of sleep. The ward had its own waiting room separate from the main area so that distressed families could have some privacy. A few small windows were set into the wall, I assumed so that the nurses could keep an eye on the families inside without having to intrude. Swinging double doors led from the green hospital corridor into a pale pink room that tried to exude warmth and comfort. But no matter how many brightly coloured pictures were hung on the walls, it would never be a place where you'd want to spend one second more than necessary. Nothing good happens here in the middle of the night. It's not my favourite shift to work, but it's quiet and it pays more than day work. Plus, I get to spend the afternoons with my daughter. That used to be enough to make up for the unusual working conditions and the higher-than-average chance of becoming part of someone else's tragedy. But that was before I met the Grey Man.

It was normal back then for me to feel like I was sleepwalking through the days. When you're awake all night, it does things to your body: you find it easier to gain weight, harder to follow a train of thought to its conclusion. I remember feeling like I was navigating life through a thin mist, with some things slipping out of view before I'd fully noticed them. My darling Jenny used to roll her eyes every time she had to repeat herself, and it became a running joke that I would never remember which day she needed her PE kit, or that I would forget when she had an after-school club and turn up early, only for her to find me napping in the car an hour later. Some days I wanted to remind her that the late shift was what paid for those clubs, that ballet shoes didn't grow on trees, that her dad didn't

contribute nearly as much as we needed. But I was too tired to start an argument.

The point is, I missed things. I lived my life half-asleep and worked half-awake. And when I did see things, I didn't always see them clearly. At least, that's what I tell myself. We all do it, don't we? Little white lies to get through the day. Maybe I saw exactly what I wanted to see.

The first time I saw *him* was the night of the three-car pile-up. The rain had been lashing down since early evening, and once the wind picked up around 8pm, it was a recipe for disaster. It was a Friday. One of those new superhero movies, I forget which one, was showing at the Odeon and the road was packed with families travelling home, backseats full of excited children high on sugar. A van driver lost control and crossed into incoming traffic. Five casualties, two eventually fatal, and all their families were gathered in my little pink room, sipping weak coffee and clutching at straws. One couple was sat in the corner near the vending machine, the wife sobbing her way through her husband's shirt, but everyone else seemed almost afraid to make a sound. If there'd been this many people in the family room on the maternity ward, it would have felt like a party, but up there, it was definitely more of a wake.

It had been an unusually busy shift, even before the accident, and I was run off my feet. On days like that I wouldn't have noticed if a gorilla had wandered in – I would have just slapped a plaster on it and sent it away with paracetamol like every other patient – yet I remember standing by the small window, unable to tear my eyes away from him. He loomed in the middle of the group, like the undertaker no one ordered. I hadn't seen him come in, but he stood out as an island of calm in the troubled waters. So quiet, so still, I would have been hard pushed to notice him anywhere else, but against the backdrop of agitated, grieving relatives he couldn't help but draw my eye. Which, now that I think about it, doesn't make any sense, because everything about him was designed to blend in.

He wore light grey hospital scrubs, the sort worn by porters, volunteers, and non-nursing support staff. His hair was dull steel, slicked back across his head. Even his skin lacked pigment. When he drew breath, I could have sworn the very air around him lost its colour. I assumed he was a volunteer connected with one of the nearby missions, here to bring comfort wrapped in bland, secular pamphlets. We got a lot of the God Squad; hospitals

attracted them like moths to a flame. Mostly they were harmless, well-meaning do-gooders who spent their days topping up water, mopping up spillages, and wheeling pensioners from one appointment to the next. In return, the hospital cast a blind eye to the appearance of their literature in the waiting rooms or the occasional religious discussion. When someone tried to push their luck and preach about His greater plan, the hospital administrators would gently reassign them to more custodial duties. But the cycle would always repeat, and we were reminded to keep an eye out for those stepping too close to the line.

I could have gone into the room, should have tried to find out what he was talking about. But nobody seemed upset by his presence. In fact, I watched as they calmed and turned to him with rapturous attention. Having spent hours witnessing the pink room almost shaking with distress, I wasn't going to interrupt their much-needed moment of peace. The next time I walked past the window, he was gone and everyone was quiet, as if their emotions had run their course. Even the wailing woman in the corner had released her husband, dried her eyes, and was staring at the clock with an expression that sat somewhere between serene and numb. I remember making a mental note to find him and thank him for his help, but that proved much harder than I imagined.

Opposite the pink waiting room was the nurses' desk. A thick plastic screen blocked it from the rest of the room and stopped fraught parents from taking out their frustrations on the bearers of bad news. I'd love to tell you it had never been necessary, but I'd be lying. I'd also be lying if I told you it had made me feel safer. I never did particularly well in small spaces. Jenny would always tease me for taking the stairs, but she never understood how much I hated riding the clunky, metal elevator between floors at the hospital. It wasn't the fear of it falling – although that was always in the back of my mind somewhere. The idea of being trapped, especially with someone else, someone unknown, unpredictable, was too much for me, even then.

On that day, Jane had been at the desk. I liked her; we understood each other and it always made the shift go easier when you had someone like that to work with. She worked nights because her husband didn't. I knew what that felt like.

'Did you see where he went? The porter.'

I'd dropped my clipboard into the tray and grabbed another.

Jane's brow had furrowed in response.

'I don't remember calling one. Who needs moving?'

'No one. There was a man in the pink room earlier, talking to the families. Grey scrubs.'

'He shouldn't have been,' she sighed, her blue eyes giving a trademark roll. 'Bloody volunteers overstepping again. I'll let HR know.'

I dropped my hand onto her shoulder with the slightest shake of my head.

'No, no, it's fine. I actually wanted to say thank you. They all seem a bit calmer now.'

'Must be a miracle worker then.' She cast a sorry glance towards the double doors. Jane didn't have kids, couldn't fully understand the parents' plight, but she knew grief. Her aunt had spent years dying in her spare room. Everyone who worked there had lost someone; I think it was part of what drew us to the job. A way to try and prevent others from going through the same heartache.

For about three months after, I kept seeing him around, but I could never manage to get close enough to talk to him. He blended into the furniture, so much so that whenever I asked the other nurses about him, few of them remembered even seeing him. He never drew attention to himself, never caused trouble, never raised a complaint from a relative, just appeared when someone needed comfort. I came to think of him more and more as a reassuring, calming presence. Ideally, we would have had a nurse attending the waiting room full time, offering counselling and comfort, sitting with people as their lives fell apart. But you try telling the people with the purse strings that that's a necessity. Non-medical expenses are the first to fall by the wayside when the budget rolls around. However, if he was in the pink room, I knew the families were in good hands.

I never stopped watching though. I saw how he approached those grieving souls and the gentle way he would rest his hand on their arm. Heard the soft lull of his speech, always too quiet for me to hear the individual words, but I could see the calm spreading across the face of each relative as he bent his head low to theirs and whispered in their ear. Sometimes I would stand and watch, aware that at some point I would blink and he would be gone. Vanished into the night; a vigilante joining

us on our war against pain. But everything changed on the day that Isaac stopped breathing.

Blond, beautiful Isaac, two weeks shy of his thirteenth birthday. He went to high school with my Jenny. They had been firm friends since she shared her iced bun with him in return for half of his cookie. He spent almost as much time at our house as she did, and I was never surprised to wake up from a day of sleep and find him with his feet on my coffee table or leaning against my kitchen counter. His mum, Ann, and I ended up swapping numbers, had to so that we could keep track of where the kids were, whether they'd eaten dinner yet, and all the other things that parents worry about. We'd chatted a bit, and I knew her by sight, but it still took me a couple of minutes to recognise her when our eyes met through the waiting room window. She looked wan and wilted, and the skin on her face clung to her cheekbones as if she were wearing clothing two sizes too small. A walking cadaver, with a glazed expression and barely any light behind her eyes. So changed was her appearance that I had to double check the admission papers to make sure I wasn't imagining it.

The babysitter, responding to a strange thump overhead, had found Isaac collapsed on the floor next to his bed. Her first call was to the emergency services, who stayed on the phone and talked her through CPR. Her second, tearfully made once the ambulance had already departed, was to his parents, who ran out on their restaurant bill and raced across town in record time. Now, Isaac's lopsided grin had been replaced by tubing and tape. A machine forced oxygen into his reluctant lungs while the doctors waited for test results and his parents waited for a miracle. They eventually diagnosed a genetic heart condition that had somehow remained hidden until puberty, but on this night, there were no answers forthcoming.

I had stood in the doorway to his room far longer than was necessary. He'd seemed so small, nothing but a pale dot on the pillow, his life reduced to beeps and lines on the monitor above his head. For a second, I pictured Jenny in his place, until the tears washed that image from my eyes. I remember thinking I should text her, let her know why he wouldn't be waiting for her at the school gate. But I couldn't do it. It was selfish;

mothers are supposed to protect their children from hurt, not cause it. Better she thinks he was ignoring her. I would pick her up from school and bring her straight to the hospital so she could sit with him. We would all take turns. It was the least we could do.

Isaac's parents were still in the pink room. While the doctors continued to run their tests and wheel Isaac in and out, it was less disruptive for them to stay out of the way. I kept Ann company while Tom, her husband, got them coffee. It's a classic husband move; nip off to do something 'useful' as soon as everyone gets emotional. Ann had seemed almost relieved that he was gone for a minute. She grabbed at my hand so fiercely that her bitten and broken nails opened welts in my skin. Her jaw was set with determination and her searching eyes felt like they were ransacking my brain for the answer before I had even been asked the question held behind her chapped lips.

'If he's going to die, just tell me.'

We're always told never to promise anything to a patient or their family. In medicine, treatment options are never an exact science, despite what everyone would like to think. It's all averages, playing the odds, and a mounting list of once-in-a-lifetime exceptions. I hadn't even glanced at Isaac's chart, but I'd been doing this job for long enough to know that if there was nothing to be done for him, Ann would know by now. Had she asked me, like every other family member, if there was a chance he would recover, I could have given comfort. Instead, she asked me the one thing I couldn't answer with certainty.

Her fingers gripped tighter, and she pulled me closer, like a black hole drawing me in. I remember recoiling slightly, the intensity of her grief threatening to engulf me. It radiated off her in nauseating waves, blackening the air at the edge of my vision and blocking out everything else in the room with us.

'He's my world Grace; I can't lose him. I won't survive it. So, if that's where this is heading, I need to know. I need to prepare.'

I should have told her that there was always hope. That she was strong and would lead her family through this, whatever the path ahead looked like. That eventually, things would find a way to be ok. But in her unblinking gaze, I couldn't find the words. It felt like we sat there for hours, locked together in silence, but in reality, it couldn't have been more

than a few seconds.

'Ann, I...' The words stuck in my throat, cloying and bloated with falsities. In all likelihood, Isaac would never fully recover. The ambulance had taken too long to get there and despite the valiant efforts of the poor babysitter, he hadn't been breathing on his own when the paramedics took over. There was inevitably going to be some sort of brain damage, but that could have meant anything from a slight delay in speech processing to full catatonia. It would likely be years before the family knew what his limitations would be. It's the worst outcome for a parent, and I completely understood why, in the middle of this bleak night, Ann would wish for her son's death.

All I could manage was to shake my head, and she collapsed forward with an audible wheeze, my silence a punch to the gut that pulled all the air from her body. I cradled her head in my arms as her shoulders shook with silent cries and my heart broke for her. It was part of the job, dealing with distraught families. We had to learn to detach ourselves from everything, but how can you do that when you're practically family yourself? It's not boasting when I say I was good at my job. I worked hard, I cared for my patients, and I never shirked my duties with the families, even when I thought they were part of the problem. But that night, I couldn't do any of it: couldn't give Ann the reassurance she needed, couldn't wake Isaac up, couldn't stop my own thoughts from spiralling. Every time I closed my eyes and tried to find a moment's peace, Isaac's face swam across my vision, closely followed by Jenny's. They became so entwined, that by the end of that night, it might as well have been her in that bed instead of him.

When the speaker in the ceiling crackled into life and demanded all staff attend an incoming call, an embarrassing sense of relief flooded over me. An excuse to leave the fog of her despair. I promised Ann I would be back as soon as I could, but I couldn't tell whether or not she had heard me. I left her, perched on the bench, her head sunk between her shoulders, like someone had taken off their skin and left it, propped up, as a joke to scare their friends. Only it wasn't funny.

I passed Tom, returning with the coffee. He met my gaze briefly, with barely any hint of recognition and no intention of stopping to talk. I watched him back through the double doors, fixed intently on not spilling

a drop, and out of the corner of my eye I saw the Grey Man at the end of the corridor. Waiting.

Ilia Mason

THE SILENCE AFTER HIS AMEN

Wyndebrow, 2000

Andrew's appointed position as the village priest was the most cherished and sacred commitment of his life.

He had always craved it- his body was unable to suppress the delicious shudders of anticipation on Saturday nights. The unrestrained excitement that grew from deep within his stomach, growing and growing, until it was his turn on the mahogany pulpit. This was where it was all finally released; a deep, passionate ecstasy onto the adoring congregation

Ever since he was a boy, Andrew would repeat the phrases of gospel so often, that any words, vowels, or reverent grunts had long since become the recurring symphony of his home.

And yet, when he stood above the enamoured congregation, it was as though he evolved into the All Mighty himself, His Grace. On that raised platform he saw himself through the eyes of his father, and his father before that, and would greedily imagine their eyes glowing with delight. Those *pure* men, whose faith sustained them until they reached Heaven.

This same kind of devotion hadn't passed onto Andrew's children: John and Isabelle. The two pale, fearful little creatures with thin bodies, who hid in each other's shadow.

John, the gauche older boy, feared the sounds of the rustling papers between his father's fingertips, when they quivered with an unrestrained vehemence. Isabelle, the sensible one, dreaded the rhythmic, disembodied hum of Andrew's voice as it trailed through their house on Trinity Drive.

John's eyes mistook their father's excitement for eternal allegiance. Through Andrew's words, John heard a true belief in the Almighty. Through his father's actions, he saw a cleansing; the harsh removal of toxins to prepare them for divine redemption.

Isabelle never complied with her brother's behaviour, she saw Andrew for who he was: a fearful man.

When others in the church saw them crying, tears streaming down onto their laps, they thought that the powerful word of God had finally aligned with them.

And yet, unbeknownst to the other churchgoers, the final time the priest's children sat still in those vapid pews, their bodies were burning, twinging and angry. Their minds were unravelling. And they were thinking:

How could such a pure, uncorrupted faith, rot into something so grotesque?

Something so unholy.

Every evening before the Sunday church gatherings, Andrew had a routine.

After saying Grace, he would be the first to gorge his meal, the stray liquid catching on his grey shirt, the chair that creaked under his body.

His wife, Eileen, perched on the edge of her seat like a scrawny bird, and would glance at him with a fluttering anxiety.

John and Isabelle would wait with queasy patience, the pale food on their plates getting cold.

Their house would be quiet, except for the sounds of Andrew's clanging cutlery, as though the very building was in solidarity with his family's silences.

The house itself stood at the eastern edge of a small village: Wyndebrow. It was a small, insular place, bordering the edge of a huge forest. It never had any visitors, nor did anyone leave; it resembled a sort of translucent glass jar. And inside this jar, the O'Dwyer family would listen as the old archaic cuckoo clock would incessantly *tick* and *tick* and *tick* on the wall of their dining room.

As a young girl, Isabelle had felt the little bird's desperation trapped inside the woodwork of the cuckoo clock. She had wanted to leave, to fly, to release out the oppressive air that suffocated the house. But she never could, his wings would break in the outside winds.

The *tick, tick, ticking* often bled into the mangled noises of Andrew's

lips, slurping and chewing; the wet excess that coated his teeth.

Neither John nor Isabelle had ever minded the sound of the clock.

It was sloshing food, whirring against his broken moist cavities, that disgusted them all.

John, who was two years older, would clutch Isabell's hand, under the table, before they ate. His grip was always cold and clammy, a contrast to the perpetually warm palm of Isabelle. They would cast sideways glances between each other; John sought to protect Isabelle through a smile of reassurance. Isabelle sought to protect John through an unyielding defiance, her strong, unshaking gaze. Their two-act sequence cancelled out the other. As their thin legs brushed up against the table, they would each mouth Grace under their breaths.

Although silent, it was an act of acknowledgment that they were there together. For each other.

When Andrew would finish eating, he would thanklessly shove the plates in Eileen's direction, her thin frame moving to accommodate his.

Oftentimes, the taut furrowing of Eileen's brow would twitch as she bent to pick up the plates, as though repressing a flinch. Her silver-threaded cross would flicker against her bony collarbones in the dining room light.

To outsiders, she was a meek, and kind woman, gracious at Church, patient with the elderly villagers. And yet she had always seemed sad.

'That poor Eileen, she's a funny little woman,' Margaret Savill would say to her husband in bed one night, after witnessing the strange tentativeness of the priest's wife in the pews.

Her husband would respond: 'Quit your nosing Mags, the Lord understands her better than you.'

Being the priest's wife didn't position Eileen as Saintlike to Andrew. To her husband, she was never a woman of virtue or spirit; she was subservient, loyal and obedient.

To Isabelle and John, she was fearless. She would often save them from his turbulent moods.

She would consume his anger, passively, intentionally; she would absorb any trace of further torment directed at them. She thought they never noticed, but they did. They always did.

After an indelicate shove of his wife towards the kitchen, Andrew

would lean back in his chair, his brimming gut creaking the cheap wood. He would lick his fingers. Sucking the remaining chicken-breast juices from behind his nails with a strange lust, and, with a final guttural moan, he would begin to hum.

Hmm. Hmmm. Hmmm.

With his feverish eyes, he would watch his children's downturned faces. His stare would rest on their half-touched plates; each time it was despotic, uninhibited, as though he could consume anything he could reach and touch.

Then, he would command: 'Eat children.'

Isabelle would be the first to start and quickly, John would follow suit.

It took mere seconds before the clangs of the cutlery became frantic, scraping the polished porcelain - it was always porcelain on Saturday night.

The potatoes, carrots, and parsnips were inhaled, leaving little time to swallow. Eileen's slender hands held one another instinctually, an act of self-assurance, as she watched the terrified expressions on her children's faces.

The sight of her husband would repulse her, and that sensation would make her teeth feel weak.

Once both children had stopped, they had little time to breathe.

Hmmm. Hmmm. Hmmm.

It was then when Isabella and John would share a look of knowing appraisal.

His sermon recital.

They had rehearsed their movements for so many years that their bodies reacted involuntarily. They had refined their instincts to the extreme.

The children knew that they were obligated to sit in the living room armchairs. The chairs were uncomfortable; bouncy springs prodded their bones - ugly, decaying patterns pressed against their skins. There was a perpetual smell of stale ashtray that clouded the musty pillows, the victims of Eileen's secret cigarettes from long ago. It felt mouldy, wrong to be sat on.

Eileen would stay behind in the kitchen, sweeping, tidying, scrubbing, her hands raw and red from the cold water, her footsteps hurried and anxious against the tiled floor.

John and Isabelle would watch silently as their father transformed into the priest that all Wyndebrow knew him as. His body would stay the same, yet its language was different. A glorious being with wide, glinting eyes, and a fervent manner replaced the man before. In that moment, he would become the generous man who would walk elderly women home with a cautious grip. The vivacious man who wooed the adoring churchgoers. The man who could recite the same scripture as no other priest could, with a ferocious, deep, passion:

'Only the *Lord* does know what we need to do as people, what we need to *believe* in!'

His jaws would carve a glorious smile, his teeth gleaming white in the fire's orange hue.

'*All* of our hearts have darkness, but the Lord can change us! He can fix our delusions into faith! We will never *have* to *sin* in his arms again!'

Even though each time he practised the same words -

over and over and over,

-they never spared him: his stubble caught the stray tears as he would recite, painfully, emotionally:

'If the Lord knows you have sinned!' his arms would reach out at the imagery pews, his eyes burning with spirit-

'My, oh MY, what a trouble! He knows each of you inside and out. You each become part of the Lord, when you devote that part of yourselves to him!'

The animated priest would then dramatically point at his heart, his hands shaking-

'If you have such *sinful* feelings, you must not act! You must rebuke all those *lustful* thoughts!'

His voice would always crack at the word 'lust' as if that were worse than sin. The children would notice the veins throbbing in his skin.

'*For God knows*, he ALWAYS knows, what we have learnt, what we fear most! It is not each other, but ourselves! And how can we fix that part amongst ourselves, why we beg the Lord for forgiveness! For the cleansing of sins! And if you can't succumb to the Lord's requests then you will be condemned to a life of pain, non-devotion! And it is without QUESTION-'

Here, he would pause and his shadow veiled the corner of the room. The room held in suspense - awaiting the enunciations of words that felt interrogative and painful - the small lungs that were filled with oppression-

Until he would reach his climax, screaming: 'THAT ONE should know better than to CHALLENGE the word of *CHRIST*!'

After he finished, his words would hang in the air: exposed, mutilated, wrung out.

John and Isabelle's bodies would deflate then, as though betraying their most secret internal thoughts. It needn't even be said, it was a shift, an unspoken feeling that pricked at their skins. And, as quickly as the recital began, the façade would drop; the animated priest dissolved. And Andrew, like a slow mechanical giant, would turn, the expression on his face animalistic.

At that point, like devoted clockwork, Eileen would appear and stand in the corner of the room; a damp towel in one shaking and clenched fist, a glass of cold water in the other.

John and Isabelle knew what would happen next. It needn't be spoken aloud. Their father would mock, shake, bully and interrogate them - brutally extracting every ounce of faith left inside of their souls.

He would promise that 'the Lord would want me to ask for your utter devotion.'

And afterwards he would cry.

Then, he would beg them, commanding them to pray for their sins, welcoming in their tears. John would move closer, his lips whispering a silent prayer. Isabelle took longer to adjust.

When both children had knelt, asking for His forgiveness, his tear-stricken face would morph into the same perfect priest as he was before.

Amen.

The final part of his sermon

London, 2022.

Isabelle stands quietly beside her office window, gazing at the sky in admiration. A tapestry of oranges and reds coloured London's distant skyline. Her eyes travel down to the bustling flocks of people on the streets below, moving in every direction, their bodies sheltered by the buildings

around them. Orange rays refract across the road, marking the end of yet another working day.

When Isabelle feels the sunset glare that touches her skin, she thinks how different the seasons are in this city. From the sombre, wet greys through to amber sunsets, autumn's skeletal trees to the navy-blue skies of Christmas time, she has seen it all from her central office. And yet, even as the years pass, summer remains her favourite. Its vibrant colours sustain her, making her feel like a rightful part of this world.

She lifts her arms toward the ceiling, her shoulder blades cracking with protest, as she savours the remaining sunlight that slips through the glass. Her body feels like a stiff doll, which isn't unusual after another day spent hunched over a desk.

After nearly seven years at the law firm *Starling & Harper*, Isabelle knows the requirements of the work. Read, edit, form an argument, and defend said argument. Having started as a fresh-faced paralegal and working herself, to the bone, to achieve the title of 'lawyer,' has meant she has spent countless hours at her desk.

She had never understood complete and utter devotion. And now, she can't imagine her life without it. It ignites her soul. It allows her to give her part to the entangled, vivid web of lives below.

She turns away from the window to survey the state of her desk. It is littered with folders, each file brimming with papers. It is a complicated mix of old case studies, ones she had looked through for inspiration, and unresolved, ongoing trials. Her own illegible red scrawl covers each page, the unfortunate reminder of some unfinished work.

The clock on her desk *tick-tick-ticks*, revealing a glaring **5:00pm**. Another hour and a half to go. Is that enough time?

Anxiety suddenly gnaws at her stomach. She is logical, determined and resolute. Why does she feel guilty?

She fidgets with the clock as a distraction, as countless thoughts flood her brain.

One deep breath in, she thinks.

In in, and away...

In those rare, quiet working days at the firm, she imagines flying through the gusts of cold wind that swirl around the city; the prickling goosebumps that decorate her pale skin. She wants to fly higher until she

reaches the peak and then let go; her body falling weightless. She isn't sure if others feel this way. And she has never felt the urge to discuss it either. For Isabelle, with all her odd quirks and unspoken reticence, it is comforting enough knowing that she is finally here; wrapped tightly in the sanctuary of this mundane world.

And, when this world bores her, she has the power to escape it.

The familiar *whoosh* of an email cuts through her reverie.

The sound is abrupt, unwelcome, and a nasty reminder of her unfinished workday. As she opens the email on her phone, her eyes frantically scan for her manager's name at the top of her inbox.

The email, which is marked as urgent, is from a 'Kathleen Marsh'.

Isabelle falters. *Kathleen?*

The name feels unfamiliar to her, and yet, the subject header is decisively attached to a big, bold word: **URGENT**.

She squints intently, with tired eyes, opening the email.

It has two addressees at the top of the page: Isabelle and John O'Dwyer.

The name appears without warning, hitting her with a punch to the gut.

To be composed right now was a sense she now threw into oblivion, her thumb frantically scrolling the long paragraph on the screen. She reads it over once, absorbing random words in no logical order. Bile rises in her strained throat. When she reads it a second time, she can feel bile enter her mouth.

John.

Disbelief shrouds her mind along with the echo of an old feeling revealing itself. Now, this foreign feeling manifests into a horrific sense of dread. With the email's words circling around inside her head, she collapses into the office chair, her knees instinctively rising to her stomach.

Isabelle knows her body well enough to understand its involuntary responses.

But that *thing* that she had.

Buried.

Below.

Devon: 2022

'John, did you catch what I said?'

Lynn's voice rings out into the dark abyss that now consumes her husband's mind.

Outside their cottage, light rain splashes on the windowsill, clinging on for a moment, before dripping down onto the ground. Inside, John stands still facing his wife, raindrops scattered across his crumpled high-vis jacket. His wife's short, stoic stature contrasts his slightly hunched, unmoving body.

His face contoured in the fluorescent kitchen light; a pale, gaunt canvas etched with stress.

Gently, Lynn prevails: 'John love. I asked you how your work went?'

And yet, despite the commendable persistence of his wife, the tall quiet man struggles to respond, as though he is stuck, stranded in the face of that unexpected, yet bizarrely expected email.

He decides to develop it, his voice stammering slightly: 'It was that broken track in Plymouth station again, it took us a while to move.'

He had only just stepped through the door, when he had checked his phone for the first time since yesterday afternoon. His twelve-hour shifts as an overnight Track Maintenance Manager are usually exhausting but even this deep tiredness can't combat the adrenaline that is now entrenched within his bones.

'S-sorry love, I- uh' he begins, noticing his quivering hands, the dirt remnants from last night still buried underneath his fingernails.

'That-um- that shift was a long one.'

He isn't sure why he has just lied to his wife, or why he suddenly feels the urge to deny, hide and escape from this conversation. His body is shaking, and yet, even in the unwavering presence of Lynn, he feels too seen, too visible.

He met her eight years ago, at a rehab centre, and she had immediately sparked his interest: Lynn speaks, laughs, and lives loudly; the stark opposite of him. John remembers her vivacity amongst his solitude, beaming that huge smile of hers. To this day, he doesn't know whether he has ever seen anything more captivating, so worth living for.

And yet, he has never revealed a morsel about his past.

How could he?

J. Scott

ROOM 529

“Can I smoke in here?”

The white comforter was on the floor by the chest of drawers with the TV on top. His backpack sat in the lounge chair, the only other piece of furniture in the room besides the king bed and standard hotel desk. All of it made of dark, chunky, heavy-looking wood.

Blue carpet covered the whole floor, except the small tiled section where the room’s door opened and led immediately to a bathroom on the left. His sneakers were on the tile, under the coatrack, where she’d insisted he take them off.

“Of course not.”

She was lying on the bed, half-covered by the thin white sheet, propped up on one elbow, flipping through the TV guide.

Digging into his backpack, he felt around for the small paper box.

Her boobs weren’t large by any means, not even close to the biggest he’d seen in real life. But the way they pulled toward the bed and rippled her skin, made his stomach tighten a bit.

The magazines in the shoe box at the back of his closet, tucked under his old snowpants, showed girls, not even just girls, women too, lying around like this.

But it didn’t look the same.

Opening the red and white carton of Marlboros, he pulled out a cigarette and brought it to his mouth.

The sweet smell of tobacco filled his nose; the dry paper stuck to his lips.

Out the window, he could see all the way down the shoreline to where the main road split in two. One road leading up the coast, the other twisting and disappearing behind houses and trees.

Both leading out of town.

Only a few stories up, the houses and shops and restaurants cowered below, huddled in clusters along the coast, like sandpipers on the summer dunes. Small patches of dusty snow curled against the seawall, trying to avoid the cutting wind that lashed across the water and kicked up in protest against the waves.

The public parking spots that curved along the beachside seawall were as empty as they always were this time of year. Just a couple of cars scattered along the whole seven-mile stretch. Mostly in front of the few open bars and restaurants. One or two probably belonged to that handful of insane people who walked along the shore in any weather.

His Wrangler sat about half a mile down the coastline, in front of Mama's Pizza. The dark green paint gleamed in the midday sun, the tan soft top specked with snow. If the wind got any worse, he'd have to go back to the carwash tomorrow. Spray all the salt off of it again.

"Can I smoke on the balcony?"

"Do not open that door," she said, eyes still scanning the faded pages in front of her. "It'll let all the heat out."

"You can turn the fireplace on," he said and nodded toward the fake fireplace in the corner of the room. Cigarette bouncing between his lips.

The magazine crinkled dryly as she flipped it closed. Her eyes met his and held them.

He blinked twice.

She blinked once, slowly.

"Fine," he said, pulling the cigarette out of his mouth. Tucking it back into the box carefully, he rolled his eyes and he shoved the carton into his backpack before letting the bag drop with a loud thud to the floor.

The clock on the nightstand read 1:36.

"You've never done this before have you?" she asked, shifting around and sitting up against the big wooden headboard.

"Stayed in a hotel?"

"Had sex with an older woman," she said, her words wavered at the end a bit as she laughed.

"What do you mean?" he asked, walking toward her. "It wasn't good?"

He tossed the TV guide off the bed, onto the floor, and sat next to her, back against the headboard.

Pulling her body into his left side, the muscles in his arm bulged next

to her small frame. His hand, almost gigantic next to hers.

"Oh, I'm not saying that, sweet boy," she said, and nuzzled her body into his. "I'm just asking, is it a habit of yours to meet older ladies in a hotel room and fuck them?"

Dark red hair framed her face, so dark it almost looked brown. The red only came out in certain light – or if you were looking close enough. Close enough to see the few strands of white weaving in the dark waves.

Scattered patches of freckles dotted her face, clustering across the bridge of her nose before dancing out under her eyes. The kind you'd see on a teenager or child even. Her lips were small and full, especially the bottom one. Maybe that's why it looked like she was always pouting. A round face and small ears only added to the illusion of youth.

If he looked close enough or long enough, actually, the cracks started to show. Under her eyes, the skin pooled and deepened in color. Even when she wasn't smiling, the creases around her eyes and mouth stayed in place.

"You're not an old lady," he said.

Her body tightened, felt rigid against him.

"I said 'older'."

"Oh, right," he said. "Well, no. Not a habit."

Her collar bone pushed sharply against her skin, creating deep wells along her neck. Reaching his right hand across, his palm covered her entire sternum.

He ran his pointer finger from one clavicle to the other.

"You think I'm so old, don't you?"

He grabbed her left boob and began massaging it. It was soft, really soft. A moan slipped from her lips as he flicked her nipple a bit. They were big, especially for her boobs.

Mismatched almost.

He pinched it, pulled, and watched it stretch away from her body. Far away from her body.

"No, I don't," he whispered into her ear. "I'm not like thinking about your age or anything like that."

"What are you thinking about?"

Moving his head to her chest he took her left nipple into his mouth and sucked hard. He grabbed her other boob with his right hand. Her fingers trailed through his hair and down his neck as her chest moved up

and down, faster and faster.

"What are you thinking about?" she repeated, her voice breathy.

"Fucking you again," he said, through teeth clenched lightly around her nipple. Her tongue flashed pink over her lips and he felt himself getting hard again.

"Already?" she said, again with a slight laugh in her voice. "I'm not sure you have time for that so soon, sweet boy."

Lips curved into a small smirk, her fingers wrapped around his dick tightly.

He bit down harder.

A small yelp escaped her and he moved his mouth to her other nipple. Her hand tightened, and the harder he bit, the faster it moved over the length of him.

"Sweetie," she said. "You really don't have time."

Up and down, up and down.

Her words were far away, floating in the air around his head but not in his actual ears.

Shoving his hand under the sheet, he dug his fingers into her body, looking for her wetness. A groan from deep inside him crawled out when he found it.

He shoved his fingers in harder, deeper.

The warm, wet welcomed him, tightened ever so slightly around his fingers. He forced them in even further; further still. Her noises consenting.

"Sweet boy."

Her hands were in his hair, pulling.

He sucked harder and more of her filled his mouth.

A bit salty and sweet, the skin around her nipple was soft. The slackness of it gave way as his tongue swirled and rolled, as his teeth pushed against it.

His stomach tightened again.

Shoving his fingers even harder, she cried out again.

Louder this time.

"Michael," she said, her tone shifted; her arms pushed his shoulders. "Stop, stop."

"Fuck," he said. The headboard banged loudly against the wall as he sat up. "What?"

"You're hurting me," she said, climbing off the bed. "Besides, we really don't have time."

"It'll be quick."

She laughed, too loud.

Her boobs swung away from her body as she bent down to pick up her jeans. They bounced as she hopped a little and dragged them over her ass. The muscles of her back moved and shifted as she slipped on her bra and clipped it from behind.

His penis was pulsing, almost painful.

A seagull landed on the balcony banister, its yellow eyes unblinking.

"Checkout is at two."

"Who cares?" he said, not moving from the bed.

"Come on. Get up."

Grabbing her sweater out from under the desk chair, she was almost fully dressed. She pulled it over her head and smoothed out the front, her nose crinkled, and she peeked at the neckline where the tag popped out to greet her.

Pulling her arms back into the body, she struggled to spin the sweater around.

He snorted as she smoothed out the front again.

"What are you laughing at?" she said, tossing his jeans at him. A smile crinkled her whole face, her eyes almost disappearing completely, just tiny glinting slits in a sea of freckles, like sunlight hitting the crest of a wave.

His pants landed on the edge of the bed, then slid to the floor.

She picked them up again.

"Come on, sweet boy, put them on."

He looked down between his legs then back up at her.

She blinked twice.

He blinked once, slowly.

Lowering her body to her knees, she slid her hands up his legs. Red nails dragged over his skin and goosebumps stood his arm hair on end. She reached behind his back and pulled her face into his lap, his whole dick disappearing into her mouth.

He closed his eyes.

Standing by the seawall, the wind kept changing directions and he kept spinning in circles, working against it.

He pressed his back against the door of the Jeep and tucked under his coat. Pulling it almost entirely over his head, he flicked the lighter three, four more times.

The wind easily cut through and the lighter kept clicking.

Climbing into the driver's seat and slamming the door, he cursed three, four times.

Rough canvas slapped against metal as the wind continued to claw its way through the air, past his soft top and into the cab.

The hollow, empty clicking of his lighter was even louder inside the car.

Opening the glovebox, he dug around. Past CDs and Dunks napkins, under the folded up MapQuests, he grabbed another lighter.

A purple Bic.

One flick and it came to life.

Breathing deeply from his finally-lit cigarette, he cranked the window down the smallest possible amount.

The wind eagerly pulled the smoke out to sea.

The waves were thrashing, fighting against the shore and the wind. The few gulls he could see stood on the sand, necks bent down against the wind. No attempt at finding food or protection.

He hadn't used a condom. She'd told him not to bother.

Was she sleeping with anyone else? Probably not.

She was old.

Could she still get pregnant?

She wasn't that old.

Wasn't his mom like thirty-two when she'd had him?

Maybe she was on the pill.

Did old people even get on the pill?

He took a long, deep pull on his cigarette.

The smoke filled his lungs and his shoulders settled against the seat, his winter coat rustling against the soft fabric.

He took the front steps two at a time as his breath puffed out in front of him in small white clouds.

His mom's Suburban was in the drive. It needed to be washed, they'd only had one real snow storm but already he could see the slushy grime building up in the wheel wells. She needed to take it to the carwash like once a month in the winter, at least. It was only two towns over and she was always running around doing random, useless errands.

She'd probably make him take it soon.

His step-dad's truck was still gone.

The front door slammed loudly behind him, and shook the small side table that held the bowl of keys. They clinked as the ones at the bottom welcomed him into the mix.

"Easy on the door," his mom said, as she walked by with a basket of folded laundry.

"It was the wind, Ma," he called after her up the stairs.

She didn't hear him. Or she ignored him.

A creased and faded leather couch was the first thing that anyone saw when they walked through the front door. The creepy old painting of a sailor and a little girl in a rowboat, in a storm, hung on the wall behind it.

A giant, threadbare braided rug covered the floor in front.

Directly across from the couch, between two windows facing the ocean, was a scratched up, wooden TV stand. Their big grey, boxy TV precariously balanced on top.

Across the room were three more windows, looking into the side yard, and two, barely-sat-in leather lounge chairs.

"Hey," he said to the twins.

Using his toe, he pulled one foot out of his sneaker and kicked it toward the pile of shoes under the side table. The other followed a moment later.

The twins said nothing.

One at either end of the couch, they were staring as the TV loudly blared some obnoxious, bright-colored cartoon.

On the far side, Josh's shirt collar was, as always, shoved into the corner of his mouth. He chewed quickly and blinked slowly. A dark wet mark spread across the entire neck of his shirt.

At the other end, next to the doorway leading to the kitchen, Joe was upside down, feet resting next to the gaudy, gold frame holding the

panicked, sea-stuck little girl.

"Hello," he said slowly and loudly, waving his hands over his head.

Nothing.

Whatever.

In the kitchen, the afternoon light was dim, barely making its way through the window over the sink.

The big room was shadowy, almost dark.

He flicked all the switches up, even the ones tucked under the cabinets, that shone down on the countertops. Warm yellow light filled the room, bouncing off the granite and dark wood that built up the kitchen.

The microwave in the corner told him it was 2:42.

Walking around the kitchen island, past the big table, he dropped his backpack into the extra dining chair tucked between the stove and the back porch door.

Back in the kitchen, the mail was poking out from the far dish rack. Near the fridge, the one that held all the plates and bowls they used every day. The rack on the other side, near the stove, held the dishes they got yelled at for using.

Shirking off his jacket, he leaned around the fridge and tossed it. It landed with a thud on the back bench, the one under the coatrack.

He grabbed the stack of mail from the empty plate slot and flipped through it.

Nothing for him.

He shoved it back, and opened the fridge.

The orange juice was tangy and cold and his throat made that loud gulping noise he hated to hear from other people.

"Mikey, come on."

His mom came into the kitchen; laundry basket now full of unfolded towels.

"What?"

"That's for everyone, just get a cup."

She disappeared down the back hall; the squeak of the washing machine door was louder than the TV noise.

A few more cold gulps made their way down his neck, before he placed the cardboard container back in the fridge next to the eggs. The condiments on the door clattered, glass on glass, as it slammed shut.

"Jesus, what's going on?" His mom was at the dishwasher now, dropping open the door and wafting away the steam.

He opened the cabinet above the fridge, the one that typically held chips or cookies or things he didn't want the twins eating.

"Nothing."

"How was school?"

"Fine."

"Nothing interesting at all?"

"Nope."

The cabinet doors clicked closed.

"There's rice-crispy treats in the telephone cabinet," his mom said as she rolled a stack of plates, one at a time, into their slots on the rack.

"Oh, nice."

Swinging open the door, he found a plate next to the black house phone. The long, curly cord snaking around the stacked pile of snacks covered in Saran Wrap. The plastic wrap clumped together and folded in on itself as he peeled it back. Pulling two treats off the top of the pile with his left hand, he grabbed the largest one with his right. The melted marshmallow fought and pulled, stretched into long strings as he yanked it from its gooey huddle and swung the door shut.

The plastic wrap still clung to one side of the pile.

"Heard you might not start on Friday."

His mom's voice had a forced casualness to it.

He bit his lip on the first bite.

"What the fuck," he said.

Her back was to him as she pulled mugs out of the dishwasher and tucked them into the corner cabinet.

"Why would I not be starting Friday, Ma?"

"Something about skipping AP History," she said and shrugged her shoulders.

"What?"

"I'm just telling you what I heard."

"Where'd you hear that? I've like barely missed that class."

The rice-crispy was sticky in his hand, he could feel the heat of his fingers re-melting the marshmallow as they pushed closer and closer together. Pulling them apart, the sticky center stretched out thinly, clumps

of rice suspended between his thumb and middle finger.

"Mrs. Dunn told me," she said as she turned back to face him. "I saw her at the Grocery Cart."

"The fuck? Why would she say that?"

"Can you watch your language, please?" she asked as she crossed the kitchen and pushed the slidy-pocket door between the living room and kitchen closed.

"They can't hear me, they're locked in on Pokémon or some dumb shit," he said. "Why did she say that, Ma? That's bullshit. I told you like a week ago, she's out to get me. Doesn't want me playing."

"Why on earth would she care if you play or not?" his mom asked with a laugh. She moved back to the dishwasher and started grabbing the silverware from the bottom rack.

"Because she hates everything. Hates us, hates the town, hates football," he said. "And I spawned her advances."

With a shove of both fingers, he filled his mouth with the entirety of the getting-too-warm rice-crispy.

"It's 'spurned,' Honey," she said. "And I'm sorry to burst your bubble, but I really don't think Mrs. Dunn was making advances at you."

"Ma, she was," he said, voice muffled from the stickiness of the marshmallow. "Kept making me stay after class. Alone. For stupid shit,"

"Right."

"She did. Like these pointless worksheets that literally had no point."

"She told me they were review sheets," she said. "To make sure you were following what was covered. In the classes you missed."

"Whatever, they were fucking pointless."

"Language."

"She was coming onto me, Ma, I'm telling ya."

"I went to school with Mrs. Dunn, Mikey. I promise you she wasn't coming on to you. I think she's trying to help you not fail this class."

"How do you know?"

"Because she's not even interested in men," she said and looked at him pointedly.

"Gross."

"That response, right there," she said. "Could be why you think she hates this town."

"Whatever. Why'd she say I wasn't starting on Friday?"

"Said she told Coach you hadn't been turning up to class. Said that, that alongside your C-average, wasn't putting you in a good spot. Said you might want to spend some time studying before Thursday. Apparently Coach wasn't too happy."

"Fuck off. That's such bullshit."

He slammed his hands hard against the sideboard of the telephone cabinet. There was a dull clatter inside, followed by a low-muffled dialed tone.

He swung open the cabinet door.

Plastic hitting plastic made a weird cracking noise as he slammed the receiver back into its spot next to the number buttons.

"Seriously, you need to chill out," she said, returning to sorting the silverware. "I'm not the one saying you're not playing on Friday. I'm telling you what Mrs. Dunn told me."

"Why's everyone always talking to each other? Why's she saying this in the middle of the fucking grocery store?"

"Why aren't you going to class?"

"It's wicked boring."

"Mikey," she said, then took a slow deep breath in and let it out dramatically. "You know what? Whatever. You're practically an adult. This is on you."

"It's on Mrs. Dunn."

"It absolutely is not," she said as she closed the empty dishwasher and turned back to him. "She was trying to be helpful."

"Yeah, right. By ratting me out to Coach?"

"Think about it," she said. "Why would she say all that and then tell you to go study for Thursday?"

"Cuz she's out to get me. Doesn't want me to start Friday."

"Oh my god," she said and threw her hands into the air.

"What?"

"There's a quiz coming," she said, eyes rolling high to the ceiling.

He stared at her for a few seconds.

Her poorly-dyed blonde hair hung limply over her faded grey Disney World sweatshirt, the one she got when he was like five or six. She was wearing a pair of old Levi's and those pale pink fuzzy slippers she shuffled

through the house when she cleaned.

Her blue eyes, the family trait, were squinting hard at him.

Arms crossed over her small frame.

He had shoved her once, when he was like fourteen, and she'd gotten a huge bruise on her shoulder. Just from bumping against the door frame. When he'd hugged her after, he didn't like how pointy and hard her bones felt against him.

The bags under her eyes pulled low. A pointy nose and wide cheeks bridged the gap between those bags and her mouth. Straight, little teeth peeked out from her thin lips, forever tinged yellow from her constantly-filled coffee mug. The one that floated around the house, making her presence known like the buoys over the lobster traps in the bay.

Everyone said they looked alike.

Hopefully they were wrong.

The phone cabinet door was still hanging open next to him, he grabbed another rice-crispy and chewed slowly on the sweet, popping stickiness.

He smirked and broke the silence.

"Kinda fucked up she told you."

She blinked her eyes once, slowly.

And let out a noisy breath.

"You're a fucking idiot," she said as they both laughed. "Stop eating all those. I'm making lasagna for dinner."

He closed the telephone cabinet, gently.

"I can't believe you thought she was hitting on you."

"I'm hot."

"She's a 50 year-old lesbian, Mikey, and you're a kid," his mom said. Her eyes rolled to the ceiling again.

The pots, hanging above the island counter, clattered against each other as she pulled the biggest one down and placed it in the bottom of the sink.

Water on full blast.

Salt and oil.

The pot filled quickly and she grunted softly as she hoisted it out of the sink and over to the stove top. The veins on her hands and wrists bulged a bit in the process.

It was hard to tell how old people were.

Especially old people.

Especially women.

She was cutting up peppers now. Long fingers wrapped around the giant knife, knuckles white from effort. The lines on her face were straight, relaxed. The blue in her eyes caught the light through long lashes.

They weren't much taller than the girls in his class. Women, like as a whole. Like they kinda all got roughly the same height then stayed there.

And they all did the same things.

Dyed their hair, painted their nails, dressed in jeans and sweatshirts.

But like their hands, their eyes, their hair, gave it away. Hinted that they'd been around longer. The women, the old ones.

Their skin too.

His stomach tightened.

Maybe it wasn't that hard to tell.

At least not who was like old-old and who really wasn't.

"How old were you when you had me?"

Her shoulders pulled tight and her hand froze mid-air, blade hovering over a red pepper.

"Twenty-nine, why?"

"Just wondering."

"Mikey, I swear to fucking god, if you got some girl pregnant –"

"Jesus, Ma. I didn't," he said, holding up his hands in innocence. "I just thought you were like thirty-two or something when you had me."

Shoulders slumped forward, she let the knife slip out of her hand and rest next to the half-chopped vegetable.

"Thank god." She rubbed her hands over her face and a muffled laugh snuck out. "I'm not that old. Geez."

"I just thought you were like wicked old when you had kids. I dunno."

"I had your sister at twenty-one, your brother at twenty-two, and the twins at thirty-nine," she said, picking up the knife. The metal clicking in an up-beat rhythm against the plastic cutting board. "None of which are 'wicked old'."

"I mean thirty-nine sounds old," he said. The telephone cabinet was right behind him. He could eat another and still be hungry by dinner time.

"It's not," she said. "Cody's mom had him at forty-six and that was almost fifty years ago now."

"Gross."

"It's not," she repeated. "But if you didn't knock some girl up, why are you asking?"

"I dunno, just some dumb health class shit."

The roar of a diesel engine and the twins' squeals from behind the sliding door announced the arrival of his step-dad.

"Cody's home early."

The microwave confirmed.

"It's parent-teacher night for the boys," she said, not looking up.

"Lame."

"I'll tell Mrs. Dunn you say 'hi' if I see her."

She laughed, too hard.

Grabbing his backpack off the chair, he headed for the dining room.

"Where are you going?" she called after him.

"To call Rich," he said. "I need his notes from History."

"You skipped today too? There's no way you start Friday, kid."

He didn't answer or look back.

Halfway up the stairs, the front door swung open. A gust of wind caught his ankles and socked-feet. Cody cursed as the front door closed behind him, hard and loud.

"Hey," his step-dad called up the stairs.

"Sup?" he replied, continuing his climb.

"Stop slamming that door," his mom called from the kitchen.

Josefina Villanueva Alonso

BANANA-Q

Something smells nice.

Booger dust swirls as I sneeze and open my eyes. My feet feel warm from the sunbeams. Is Jesus coming? Not through those roof holes, I hope. Up-side-down Larry is gone. Phew. Lizards are the worst! Imagine if his Mongol-pencil head snapped and fell while I slept.

Ack! A-te!

She scares me like Jack in the Box. We share a bunk bed, but I sleep at the top. She dangles a piece of paper and I smell roses. Weird words escape her mouth. I study how she keeps herself steady: her elbows hug the guardrail on my right. I sit up. Sweat skids down my side. It's not a school day, but why is she already up? OWW! My pinky is stuck in the slats. I guess it's time to get up.

A-te curls her mouth on every word like a nut-picking elephant:

*All there is
Is a picture of you,
Having so much fun
Like no one else
Is there with you.*

Who? I say, but she reads on as I feel my bum. A-te likes to poke it through the slats with her big toe from below. I need my foam. But Nanay says, wait. The paint comes first. And A-te won't share her fuschia-fitted foam. She insists it's red. I say it's fuschia—my winning word. I bet it's 'cause she can only spell 'red.'

*But I was there too
Watching you
Not watching me
Not once.
Nothing.*

So dramatic, I say. Let me see. But she yanks the paper away and there's the rosy smell again.

Wait a second—is that my poetry homework? On my Sailor Moon stationery? A-te leaps and disappears. I scramble down but my legs can't find the bottom bunk. Ladders! I knew they would come in handy one day. But Nanay doesn't believe it. Not in a bunk bed, she says, though the seller only wanted an extra hundred. It's cold and sandy when my feet land. I rub them together then leap past the linoleum patch. Is that the map of India now? The rough edges are thick with brown stuff. Ew. Ow. Papercut. Where is she? I push the seashell curtains to one side, and I'm stranded. Sigh. One by one, I pick out my hair like pechay in my teeth. Now that's done, let the adventure begin!

What took you so long? Ate says, holding my poem high like a prize. Give it back!

In the kitchen, Nanay's back is a rhino. A-te and I ceasefire at the smell of sweet plantain frying with caramelised sugar and, with eyes closed, we duet—Banana-q! Nanay drains each one of excess oil and leaves them to cool in a colander next to the whale-sized wok. She doesn't use a stick. She says we might poke our eyes with it, though the bananas should have it, because banana-q is the banana version of barbecue. And what's a barbecue without a stick?

The rhino slowly turns. She wipes her hands on her daster and flicks sweat off her eyebags. Her eyebrows draw two lines, her arms triangles.

What is it this time? Can't you two ever get along?

Her pitch sends mayas rustling like rice grains on the roof.

I swear one of them could have tripped in a hole.

She started it, I say.

Ten-Ten has a crush, A-te singsongs.

Huh?

Nanay's eyes hover on the paper in A-te's hand. Oh no! This is worse

than lizards!

I see my life in slow-motion: Nanay will read my poem with a megaphone and the neighbours will pass it around like a pamphlet. I guess that's all, folks! I'll pack my bags and my stationery, and bid goodbye to the scurrying Bubu-wits, mighty Coach Roach and, alright, even Larry. Maybe it's time I found my real parents. Maybe A-te's right all along. Nanay never denied it. A-te says I need only to look in the mirror to know I'm adopted. So when I meet my rich family, I'll tell them I can count, write cursive, and run errands fast. If they say no, then there's always a pig farm. Somewhere. I can survive on leftovers, snooze with the piglets, and read them poetry. Not bad, I don't think.

Nanay snatches and smudges Sailor Moon's silky hair with her big hand bulging with pregnant worms. Her eyes go right to left. I wait for disaster.

The termites on the old study bureau stop mid-dance. They tango again when they realise it's just the sun. Soon, it won't matter because the end is near. Sunshine's already flooding in. I squint, but never mind the brightness. It's the hollow-block wall half-painted in ube-violet—Nanay's favourite colour—that hurts my eyes more. Tsk. Tsk. What nonsense, Nanay speaks again and sends termites skydiving. Analisa, give this back to your sister!

A-te is a termite. Stiff.

NOW!

A-te rolls her eyes before offering my poem back. She waits for the rhino to turn around before withdrawing her arm:

Actually, can I keep it?

Huh?

She folds the paper and pockets it while humming a weird nursery song:

*Sir, sir, on the boat
Take this child and go off.
In Manila, at the mall
Trade her for a nicer doll.*

* * *

A-te shifts the Tupperware between sweaty palms like it might slip. I'm too grown up for this, she says. Let Ten-Ten do it.

She's too young to carry that around, Nanay says.

But I was her age when I started.

Bring her along then. Let her have the purse, Nanay says and pauses. Or I'll fall short again, she says.

It was that one time!

Quit it now, will you? And don't come back 'til that's empty. And stop by Aling Rita's—she owes me. Now, off you go or those will go soggy.

Nanay, can I have some, I say. I lift my praying hands while A-te mimics me with her mouth.

Nanay touches my hair and says, Later, okay? When you sell out. *
Banana-q!

Louder.

Banana-q! My voice bounces from one grille gate to the next. The flat rusty roofs of the row houses shine like bronze medals in the sun. I wish Nanay bought a house in the next village instead. Their roads don't crack even though the houses look heavy. Is that your best one yet?

What? I say, while my laser eyes untangle the power lines overhead. A-te makes a sound. She lifts the Tupperware to my eye level.

I carry and you shout, remember?

But it's siesta, I say. Let's just pick up twigs or santan and make bracelets.

She surveys Katipunan Street, world-famous for dog poo. With Ate's nose high, she sniffs out napping neighbours. Katipunan hums like bubbling pork skin.

See? I say.

Then wake them up!

BANANA-Q! Pigeons lurch out of nowhere. They splash dark matter all over. Hey now, are you inviting trouble?

The bananas are quiet inside. A-te stops and lifts a knee and uses it as a table. She tests a few ways to carry the Tupperware. Hug. Hip. Nah. She gives up and carries it the old way: by the side handles.

The sun makes wires out of my hair. If I had eggs, I could fry them on my head. I hear the faint tune of Sailor Moon playing from an open window. I wonder if A-te would let me go back home for a bit. I look at her looking at me and I look away right away. Banana-q! Anyone wants some banana-q?

We enter a main road I don't know the name of. An angry tricycle zooms past. The leaves barely sway. The asphalt looks volcanic. An auntie cooling herself with a straw fan talks through the grilles of a sari-sari store. She walks away with a bottle of Coke. I lick my lips.

A-te and I cross over without speaking. We continue down the hill with the road on our right. A rainbow jeepney jumps over a speed bump. The passengers squeal and check their heads for lumps. The shirtless boy riding at the back almost gets thrown off. He sits back down atop a sign that says, How's My Driving, while the tailpipe smokes. I turn on a narrow street, but A-te stops me by the shoulder.

Look around first before entering a new place, she shushes.

Why?

She looks above me and says, To make sure we don't see anyone familiar. You mean, your classmates who hail you as cool in school? But I don't say it. She would strut around like she got 90 in P.E.. Unlucky me, Nanay would make us walk home together after school. But I'd keep to the curb of Horacio Avenue while greasy-haired boys tail her. It's impossible, they'd say, you can't be related! But even Cinderella had ugly sisters. I have a name, I'd say, and they'd snicker and giggle and rake their muddy hair. What's so pretty about a giraffe anyway? The only one with horns.

How can grass grow through concrete? Would they bother if they knew

they're just weeds? I look around and A-te is kicking pebbles on the side. I wouldn't, if I were her. Even the stones look angry in this heat.

This is boring! It's been ages! I'd rather be indoors singing into the electric fan, and not out here in El Niño heat with a sister who doesn't like me. No one likes banana-q either! We've sold nothing. My skin's sizzling. My armpits are sobbing. I raise an arm to my nose, and think of spring rolls dipped in vinegar.

You're disgusting.

And you're mean.

Don't talk to me, she says. Just finish these off so I can go back and you stay out and don't bother coming back. Like I give a rat's ass.

How much? Someone asks.

The sound of a scraping metal gate makes both of us turn. A short, stout woman appears.

Three fifty a piece, Auntie, A-te says.

Good on you working hard in this heat. Give me five, child, so you can go home. A-te smiles so I smile while she struggles with the lid stuck from the steam. What are you smiling at, she whispers loudly to me. Stop daydreaming and get Auntie's payment.

Auntie hands me a twenty-peso bill. I look up and do takeaways in my head. I know this but A-te sneers at me. I clutch the purse with my armpit to free up my fingers. Twenty take away...

Still can't count?

Auntie smiles with pursed lips and I feel red in the face. Should I ask A-te if she could spell fuschia? Another time then.

The lid won't give. A-te puts the Tupperware down. She tries again. And again. Until the lid goes off but she's off balance and almost lands on the jackpot. Dog poo! Phew! With steel tongs, she picks up the bananas, one after the other, and wraps them in banana leaf oiled with coconut.

Here, Auntie. She thanks and gives kind auntie her change.

I would have gotten there in the end, I say.

Really? When the sun sets?

Auntie goes back in through the same gate, chuckling.

How much?

How much?

We stay put until no more gates open up.

I'm not sure, I say.

Just hop over. We'll sell out faster this way. We'll be done way before they lock up these gates.

I don't know.

We'll sell them for six each. We keep the difference.

I keep my grip on the cold metal fence that separates our subdivision from the rich people's village. A-te's already on the other side of it.

Don't you want your own foam?

BIG HOUSES IN BIG SPACES. We walk along the long row with our mouths open. The roofs have waves and peaks. The lawns have lollipop trees. Wait—they have their own

trees? The house gates are miles away from the front doors and you can climb over if you want to. They don't have grilles. They have white pebbles!

A-te is quiet. As I am.

Here, she says, passing me the Tupperware. Your turn.
BANANA-Q!

Now I carry and shout. But this time I scream so the rich can hear. I tiptoe to see above the hedges but no one is around. So much space for nothing. Where are they hiding?

I turn a corner when I see a wooden sign for Ma-ayos Street stuck on the white wall of a house, like it owns the whole street. Does it? How can a house own a street? But if a house can own a tree...

How much?

A man appears from the shadows of a tree with clawing roots. Flies buzz away from fallen mangoes and on to a clump of poo. He takes off his cap and stubs a cigarette with his battered Rambo—the flipflops for

naughty bums. I feel a little chill under the tree.

We've sold out, A-te says before I could say six pesos, Uncle.

It looks like your cute, little sister here is struggling. I can help. Open it. Rambo chews loudly. His tongue plays with a metal ring on his mouth. He has overchewed his bubble gum.

A-te puts a hand on the Tupperware I'm hugging.

I said we're sold out.

Are you now?

A dog barks in the distance. We all look up. A-te grabs me by the wrist. The Tupperware lid slips but I catch it in time.

Rambo scrapes his throat like a tricycle that won't start. He spits out his gum with a yellow-green phlegm on the crack-less concrete. Don't look back, A-te says. She speeds up ahead and I glance quickly back. Rambo picks something up, puts it in his mouth, and chews.

It's your fault.

Huh?

I told you to look first! Now, we had to talk to that creep.

Creep?

Are you really that stupid?

I'm not stupid. I'll tell Nanay you called me stupid.

Ugh. Such a baby.

I'm not a baby.

Grow up already!

Why do you hate me?

'Cause you took my place as Nanay's favourite!

We stand like bulls in the windless heat. It's quiet, except for the loud noises coming from our noses. I shove the Tupperware into her ugly belly. She grabs it, but her wet hands let it slip. The Tupperware slips and falls and thuds on the ground. The lid flies off and we stare at each other as the bananas roll down and down and down.

The sun hides behind the santol trees. A-te drags her feet and holds the Tupperware low by her thighs. I kick pebbles on the side and pocket the

white ones I see. Ew. That one's a sucked-out santol seed! The purse full of coins is silent under my armpit.

The buzz of a scooter makes us both look up. A fair-skinned boy is on it. The air smells of baby powder.

What's wrong? I ask A-te who stops walking.

Nothing, she says and runs up ahead.

We've seen this house before. How come they all look the same? Our ugly houses are more original.

A-te is not listening.

It's this way. No, this way. No, this...

A-te, are we lost?

Shh. Keep it down.

She tilts her head towards a big, blue house at the other end of a street lined with roses.

That one there, she points, is where Lawrence lives.

Who?

A-te puts the Tupperware down. She tucks her hair behind the ears. She flips a mirror open, pokes at her spotty burnt cheeks, and bites her lips a few times. She pretends to pull down her undersized shirt, tugs at her faded skirt, and cups her scarred knees. She curls her hair with index fingers on each side of her neck before pocketing the mirror. A neatly folded paper falls as she withdraws her hand. She picks the paper up, then turns to me.

How do I look?

A-te looks excited from a distance. She fiddles non-stop at herself and only stops when Lawrence comes out. I can't read their lips, but they don't say much. Then A-te takes out something from her pocket and gives it to him. My poem!

But how can she? It's not about him, it's about her!

I look down on the ground. At my nails that need washing. I hide in a

corner to give them privacy.

My legs feel sore.

I pick santan flowers on the side and thread the stems together. It's getting dark. I hope they haven't locked the big gates yet. My tummy growls and feels sorry about the wasted bananas that we binned in the Tupperware. Poor Tupperware—I'll wash it up later. I pick a few more santan and suck out the juice.

A-te reappears before I can finish the bracelet, talking very fast. She says that he said that she has lice on her head and he kept calling her Ana-lysa. And what is she even doing in his neighbourhood? Then he said something about calling security. I grab the Tupperware off the ground and dash off.

Ten-ten, that's not the way out!

Lawrence looks like he can't push their heavy dark brown door open. I wave and tilt the Tupperware to his direction to show the juicy bananas inside. He hesitates for a bit, then walks up to me along a white-pebbled path. He sticks out a finger and I wait while he speaks to someone through the gap in the door. He shouts. Mummy, would you like some banana-q?

As fast as I can, I leaf-wrap each banana while keeping an eye on Lawrence and his delicate hairless legs while he throws coins in the air, strolling like he owes the world nothing but his holiness while I pick out hair and dog poo and any bits that don't look like crusted sugar, and I pass him his bananas as he closes in, and at the last coin that he pinky-drops into my purse, I insist that in light of His Majesty's extraordinary kindness, please can he take all the remaining bananas free of charge, and he says, really? and I say, yeah, and I swear His Paleness turns red with excitement and I smile my biggest smile 'cause I promised my Nanay an empty Tupperware.

* * *

The sun had a nice day. She paints the sky in reds and violets and finally rests. Aunties collect crispy clothes from wash lines, uncles, their boys and girls playing tag. News jingles through the windows mean the animes are

over. Lizards kiss the ground. I kill a mosquito as we walk home.

Why don't we call Nanay 'mummy'? I ask A-te after a while.

She only chuckles and takes the Tupperware from me, tapping it like a hollow drum.

Nanay starts her litany. This time, we blame Aling Rita who should keep her promise. Nanay empties the bulky purse by the kerosene stove and doesn't close her mouth until the news credits roll. Her list of life's troubles has me and A-te in the Top Ten, and when she stops to catch her breath, she says, Ten-Ten, go finish off the banana-q I saved for you. When I do, I tiptoe around Sandy the Snail to wash myself. In the bulbless darkness at the back of the house, the water feels nice. I head for bed before the sweats start again. But where's A-te? On the top bunk, snoring!

Liv Akhurst

OBJECT RELATIONS

Some missionary (ha!) was saying this to Jen, punching at the crosswalk call button like come on, come on, *come on*.

Cornered, he had her, the traffic slipping by like metallic fish, not stopping for anything. Desperate to escape she probably did look it – lost – but not, you understand, in the spiritual sense. Sloping along Crabapple Road, chin tilted up and eyes sorta glazy, Jen was only lost in thought, wondering can she swing the bus, or should she walk all the way to Carnelian Street, to the basement apartment with the bars on the window she moved into last winter.

The missionary, only a boy, pressed on.

Are you interested in the word of our saviour, Jesus Christ? His forehead glistened with sweat, but his side-part remained immaculate. A striped tie snaked all the way, almost, to his belt. His nametag read Brother Carmichael. Jen licked her lip as if she anticipated a snack.

Jesus Christ, she said, in this breathy dumb-blonde voice she could do. I don't think I know him.

The boy missionary smiled, stuck to his script.

Would you like to come to church this Sunday?

You mean like a date?

Jen swished her ponytail, a little frizzy from the mid-shift hostessing at Small Fry's Bar and Grill.

The boy missionary's cheeks flared redder than the DON'T WALK sign

holding them there and she felt bad, almost, for saying it. He probably never even looked at a dirty magazine before and now this girl, with long bare legs and mouth-red nail polish was flirting with him in the street –

- Did you need to say missionary so many times, Jen? Cole says.

They're in a booth at Killjoy's Tavern, the dive with the sticky oak tables and nautical-themed décor so out of place here, a day's drive from the ocean.

Boy missionary, she corrects him.

He snarls at her and her thighs prickle. She gets this way about guys when they have a girlfriend, like she is trying to figure out what the fuss is about.

Rachel pulls on her beer and shakes her head.

You can't walk alone on Crabapple Road, they're always out there, prowling around –

Who? Jen says.

Missionaries –

Cole growls and Jen is doing her cartoon villain chuckle. Rachel ignores them.

I mean it, Jen, their church is right there behind the community centre. It's so predatory.

Jen half listens, nodding sweetly, and pictures life drawing classes at the community centre happening just feet away from the fluorescent-lit hum of scripture study next door. She attended the class once, with Rachel, and she made the guy's cock three times bigger – in her picture, I mean. Really, Jen would have liked to be the model.

Cole manoeuvres out of the booth and bumps his head on a plastic lobster swinging from the ceiling.

Another round?

Rachel waves her hand no, sealing her lips like a tomb. Classes tomorrow, she must have.

I'll have two then Jen says, avoiding the lobster and fluttering after Cole.

* * *

If Jen has her eye on someone, some kid she noticed at the bar, then again on the other side of the room, it becomes a game to learn his name, his friends. It's an accomplishment to score him, even if it takes weeks, even if the sex itself sucks when it finally happens.

To know she can have what she wants, is the point.

* * *

Rachel left hours ago and they are still here and Jen has been plied with three beers, four, and Cole is telling her about his grandfather dying in his childhood bedroom. He concludes with a shrug.

At least now I have my own place.

It must have been hard, Jen says, squinting down the neck of her beer like a telescope – none left, all gone – that it wasn't your choice to move out. She shakes her head to blur out the memory trying to surface, her father's words before she left for Carnelian Street. *What is it with the women in your family?*

Cole goes to queue up some songs on the jukebox and that's when she spots him at the bar, the baby-faced kid she flirted with at the Untimely Demise show the weekend before last. He's wearing the same Lingerlings Longsleeve shirt and Jen is beginning to wonder if he owns nothing else.

He dresses like he's in high school, she thinks, but she found out from friends that he's a field hand at the petrochemical plant over the hill and now she needs to see him naked.

Cole slides back into the booth and while her body is still there, Jen is like the beer from before, all gone.

Hold this, she tells him, handing him the flannel from around her waist. He watches her with this surly look which Jen doesn't notice because she's halfway across the bar getting her husky barfly voice ready. If she did, she would probably think it looks like anger, a little – the delicate frown and flaring nostrils, the snarly set of his mouth – but that's wrong. It's disbelief, that he's wearing, at how he just watched Jen disappear from the room.

* * *

How many new guys can she have in a month? At least one, usually more. If it goes a month then – it wouldn't, there would not be a month without a guy.

* * *

She lures him back to Carnelian Street and there's kissing and things and their shirts come off and they settle on the bed. He peels himself out of his boxers, which are old and thin and sag at the crotch, and he's hairier than she thought he would be but she's into it, kind of, the way the coarse shroud traps heat.

She lets him push all the way inside, no preamble, so that she feels him prickling her thighs, discharging the itch she had from wondering about Cole, from flirting with the missionary, funny to think of him now, spread-eagle with the weight of a stranger pressing into her. Closing her eyes and biting her lip it scares her a little, that she likes this so much, her whole

pelvis humming, closer, closer with each robust –

– he slices out of her with a gasp and she feels the soft patter on her thighs and stomach. He wrings out the tip like a tube of expensive moisturiser, working at it, serious, can't look at her yet. And it's not kind, okay, but she can't help it, Jen is gripped by the giggles, she laughs and laughs, covering her face, peeking through her fingers at the mismatched ceiling tiles.

I'm sorry, it's been a while, he says but she shakes her head, a tear soaking into the pillow.

It's not you she tells him, and she's not lying exactly. It's the whole situation, on her back like a dead frog, a stranger crouched over her, holding his dick. She will carry this image of him around and she doesn't even know his last name.

You can go now, she says, sliding her butt up the bed and ducking back into her shirt. I'll see you around, Mr Longsleeve.

* * *

Jen can fuck like a guy. That's it, the best way of putting it, catching up with friends and trading stories.

Everything she does is for the sex, talking and touching, a date even, is for sex. With other girls it seems like sex is something they do in exchange for the everything else.

* * *

Four pm, yellow segment of sunlight arcing through the bars on the window. She needs to get ready for work, but she's curled on the mattress on the floor – her bed – shuffling through her matches on BandBang, the

app for musicians and the girls that want to fuck them. Hates starting late in the day, can never do anything but lie in bed watching the hours slip by on her phone screen while she hopscotches between social media apps. She's looking for Brett from Ways of Knowing, they're playing at Caterwaul's tonight.

Jen prefers bands to anything else, but it's like how you can't, all the time, eat what you want. You would get fat and lazy, or it's too expensive – that's it, band boys are like the name brand macaroni Jen craves, and the others are the boxes of grocery store knockoffs piled in her corner of the pantry, replenished weekly so she never runs out. If she waited until she could afford the name brand, she would starve. The Great Value mac and cheese sustains her while she waits for her chance to indulge.

A tour of Jen's room while she gets ready – we were here last night but it was dark or, we were a little preoccupied. We couldn't see how Jen has decorated with polaroid photographs of her friends. She tiles the walls with them, pinning them up with the thumbtacks she takes from the kitchen drawer, Jerome asking what do you need those for? I'm not hanging posters, don't worry – stop – please, stay out of my room. There's a constellation by her vanity where she is doing her make up now, smudgy eyeliner and a soft red lip to offset her freckles. She gives herself one last sultry look and turns to find sheer black tights on the floor by the closet, always left open like an unfinished thought, spilling clothes onto the floor. She watches plumes of dead skin cells unfurl as she pulls them on one prickly leg at a time.

The best ones she saves for by her bed. Rachel pointing her camera at Jen pointing her camera at Rachel; the ferocious bloom of the fire pit in someone's backyard where they drank all summer, cheaper than bars; Jen topless in someone's bed, her shoulders bare, hugging the blanket close to her body and peering out from underneath her hair. She likes that one a lot.

She smooths a closefitting black dress over her hips and covers the bed-stink with a mist of fruity body spray. At Small Fry's she plays a silhouette of herself, flitting between tables in a tiny skirt and smiling all night.

You're pretty Jennifer, Dave told her when he hired her, you're perfect. For the job, he meant, but Jen had to admit she really did feel it, making men fall in love with her just by the way she looked when she showed them to their table.

* * *

The lockers at Small Fry's are crammed into a snaky little hallway leading to a fire escape where kitchen staff and servers take their smoke breaks. Jen follows the smell of cigarettes wafting in and finds Kayla leaning against the brick wall by the dumpster. She rolls her eyes and ashes her cigarette on the ground.

I thought you were Shauna.

Shauna, floor manager. They call her the evil stepmother behind her back, Jen and the handful of college girl servers she talks to when it's dead, shares flustered eye rolls with during rushes. Kayla sniffs hard through one nostril of her aquiline nose, her mouth downturned. Jen pictures her future face, tired-looking and jowly, a bit like Shauna, but that nose might save her, might elevate her face to handsome elegance. She's been looking at people's faces like this, ever since the community college class on portraiture she took, even after she had to drop out.

My friend Rachel would adore your face. She's an artist, she takes photos and stuff.

Cool. Kayla nods. Maybe she'll make me a star and I can get out of here. She drops her cigarette on the ground, stamps it out. Check me.

She turns around, her back is covered with brick dust. Jen pats it off as they breathe out of time, a soft sliver of intimacy before the furies ahead.

* * *

Jen floats around the dining room all night, otherworldly gorgeous. She's getting paid to flirt, it's that sort of establishment, and not all the time, even, with creepy old guys. Plenty of customers take this the wrong way. Barely an hour into her shift some kid out to dinner with his parents slips her his number across the hostess station as she sorts through nametags – *who shall I be tonight* – on his way back from the bathroom. She watches as rosettes of shame heat up his cheeks like rings on an electric stove top and thinks, the audacity. Of course she likes it, it makes her smirk, feel like her whole body is smirking.

Still no sign of Brett from Ways of Knowing. Jen slides her phone out from behind the pen pot at the hostess station and wonders why her profile isn't working on him. Kayla returns a sheaf of menus and lets out a monumental sigh. It's 8:30pm, new tables have slowed; the front of house girls sleep on the wing, riding the lull.

Don't relax yet, Jen says. I need you to cover for me tonight so I can leave early.

Kayla bares her teeth for too long, her gasp grotesque in the moody light of Small Fry's.

Do you have a date?

Nothing animates a Boyfriend-Girl like boy talk. She cosies up to Jen behind the station and fiddles with the register.

Not a date, Jen says.

Is it the guy from last week?

Lingerlings Longsleeve, she means. Jen brought him up on an earlier shift, in the pejorative – she said something like *I keep seeing this cute guy around, but he's always wearing this one band shirt, even at another band's show, kind of sad*. Kayla is giving her a knowing look, even though she knows less than nothing. Jen swallows a bubble of nausea. Boy talk is like currency, to Kayla. If Jen gives her enough, she can get what she wants.

Promise I'll tell you everything next week.

Kayla lives her life in perpetual pursuit of a relationship and assumes that all women share this common goal. She constantly tells all the servers about her most recent betrayal with a glee that reminds Jen of a ten-year-old bragging about their broken arm. She thinks, obviously, this is some sort of feminine rite of passage.

Before she can wheedle any more from her, Jen steals away to the bathroom, waits it out in a stall. She smudges her eyeliner and bites her lips swollen to the soft tap of a leaky faucet, her sighs skittering off the tiles. After twenty minutes she tells Shauna she's sick, slips away – show time.

* * *

Now that Jen had tried the boyfriend thing, and it was over and done with, it seemed obvious that her approach was superior. She'd seen the way girls like Kayla got played, the way boys acted, taking everything – not Zach, he wasn't like that, but what did he give to her, is the question to remember – and girls were buying into it all, this concept of relationships, this word that Jen was so sick of hearing. It seemed to her an apt name, relationships. Ships, after all, are named for women and sunk by men. But these girls, they bought into it and they did everything right, surrendered themselves and still, at the end of it all, their hearts in pieces.

Girlfriends get fucked, is what she thought, and I want to be the one doing the fucking.

* * *

*At least mildly self-obsessed
Knows he's hot
Sort of weird but doesn't give a fuck
Looks like he might have a drug problem; most likely just wants you to think that
HELPFUL: a reputation that precedes him
MOST IMPORTANT: not interested in a relationship*

Scribbled on the back of an envelope Jerome left out on the counter. They're in the kitchen at Carnelian Street and Jen is trying to answer the question, Rachel's –

What is it about bands, Jen?

They're back from seeing Ways of Knowing at Caterwaul's and Jen is still pining for Brett, yearning for him with it, you know, so bad it feels like her heart is the one doing it.

I should introduce you to my friend Tyler – you would love him, Rachel tells her.

Jen upends her purse all over the floor, paws through it drunk and lame, a sweat-streaked cross on the back of her hand, searching for her fake I.D.

Where the fuck is it? I had it at Small Fry's.

Rachel drops to her knees to help.

Don't think it's here, sweetheart.

Jen falls back on the filthy tiles and sighs out sweet agony. He's probably, she's thinking, seeing him up there with his guitar round his neck and his hair falling everywhere, he probably met some other girl, took her back to a motel. It's probably over, by now, the good part. She's wrapped in the sheets, her thighs stuck together, and he's playing something for her, a new song. He's telling her no one else has heard this, you're the first.

I wanted him, or someone – I want something –

Maya Lane

BINARY VEIL

When an animal is cornered, it will often resort to a state of fight or flight.

The fight or flight response is triggered by the release of adrenaline and cortisol, leading to a rapid increase in heart rate, breathing and blood pressure. For some, flight is the easier option. It's better to cut losses than lose a life, so they run. They kick up dust as they tear through mud, grass, blood, sand. They pant and they panic and they don't risk a glance backwards. Backwards is a death wish, backwards is flesh torn off bone, fragile tendrils of life stolen from lungs, eyes rolled back exposing pearly white nothingness. To disappear is to live another day.

But others dig their feet into the ground and grit their teeth and lift their chins. The fighters are different. They stand in their fear, let it shake their limbs, soak their backs in sweat. They strike despite this fear, the overwhelming odds stacked against them. They twist and snarl and snap their fangs because it is their primal instinct to defend. Honour, life, ego – it doesn't matter. It doesn't even register in those moments, those flashes of violence, gaping mouths stretched into a blackened void of fury and intent.

Fighters win and fighters lose.

Andi Von Heller has been trying to ignore the nagging feeling of flight since birth.

Moments of fight for her were manufactured carefully, learned actions weaved through muscle and tendon, an unshakeable calm informed from years of gathering her own bloodied knuckles into her lap and learning to breathe through the sting. In these fleeting sequences of fight, Andi could breathe.

Within the metallic stink of the warehouse, surrounded by the grunts of dying men, Andi levelled the barrel of her gun right at the forehead of the final gang rat. He was a twitchy thing, soaked in blood, his body augments flashing and sparking out. His chrome jaw was half unhinged and dented from her last pistol whip.

She exhaled, then flatlined him with a clean, precise shot to the dome.

His body jerked and then slumped limply, the stench of fried circuits and death sizzling off his cooling corpse. Andi holstered the gun, hands shaking a little from the adrenaline of it all. Never in fear. The shake reminded her that not all was lost, that despite the hum of the chip in the back of her neck, her second heartbeat, the most important one remained untouched. It strained her ribcage, kicking wildly. She held her fingers to her wrist momentarily and found the rhythmic crests of life under her hot skin. *Human.*

“Good shift, Hellcat.”

Andi turned at the sound of Ren’s voice. He was busy stripping the mag from his gun. She smirked, a sharp thing, then brushed past. A few strands of hair were plastered to her forehead, coiling around her cheekbones. Her ponytail whipped around her shoulders in damp ribbons.

“How many kin d’ya think Jiro’s gonna shave because you got into a fistfight with a yoko?”

Ren barked a laugh, falling into step beside her. Cleanup was here already; chrome disks zipping past, washing down the blood on the concrete with a product that smelt potently of bleach and petrol.

“Dunno. If you keep that mouth shut, he’ll never know ‘bout the civvies.”

Andi snorted. “Don’t piss me off then.”

The evac was waiting outside, a sleek black hovercar purring in the dark, driverless. The door slid open soundlessly and Ren stepped aside.

“Ladies first.”

Andi shoved him with two gloved hands into the seat.

They shared a stimstick on the way back into the core of the city from the Rim, blowing smoke out of opposite windows. The buzz settled into both of their bellies nicely, unknitting tension they didn’t know they’d been holding in their muscles. Andi downloaded the footage of the gig from her HUD to the glowing holo in her hand. Silvery tendrils coiled from her parted lips as she sent the file to Jiro. He replied promptly.

You never disappoint

¥5,048,840 as discussed. Loop me when received.

J

Andi tilted her head back against the headrest, turning her gaze out of the window. Neon lights squinted down at her, fragmented and distant. She craned her neck just enough that she could see the moon, an oval disk in the sky like a saucer of cream. She wanted to drink it all up, to gorge herself on its fleeting, balmy surface. But it disappeared behind a towering apartment block and didn’t resurface, a victim of the industrial monster. She took a harsher drag on her stick and felt it scratch the back of her throat.

Ren swore under his breath.

“Framefucker robbed me of a thousand.”

“Told ya.”

“Drinks on you, then.” He gave her that smile he knew she hated. Slow, intimate, probing. The car stopped at a light and a spill of crimson tinted his face.

She looked away fast.

“You know what happens when we drink.”

Ren was silent for a few seconds.

“Yeah, I know.” He muttered.

Andi cleared her throat. "You hear about the Takakō gig?"

"Mhm. Looks like some bullshit."

"Business as usual."

"Bullshit as usual."

Andi nudged him with the steel toe of her boot. "J's got us eating good, though. Corp contracts always pay heavy."

Ren grunted. "Don't care. Fucker paid no mind when he set Kenzi up in Odaiba."

Kenzi was the ghostweaver hired for their last job. He was a twitchy guy, bleached yellow hair spiked up, body always jittering with a cocktail of suppressants to keep him focused whilst decoding. Him and Ren were tight, already five gigs deep into a bond. Jiro had hired Kenzi as collateral, as assistance to a certain point. Ren had lashed out so hard when the gig closed that Jiro's bodyguards had to physically restrain him from putting a bullet in the middleman's brain.

"Well," Andi kept her tone measured. "How 'bout you just be grateful he values your life enough to not shoot you in the ass."

"Yeah, Andi. Until he *does*."

"You know what your problem is?" She shifted her body to face him. "You're too damn sentimental."

Ren tossed his stimstick. "Yeah? Well it's always the same story with those corpos: employ some poor little doro-rats to fetch 'em the latest shiny toy. They couldn't give a fuck if we flatline doin' it."

"Right," Andi snorted. "And we also couldn't give a fuck if they lived or died, so what gives?"

"Dunno. Must be nice not bein' disposable."

Andi's chest tightened at that, a subtle knitting of her ribs together. She

didn't particularly want to talk philosophy. Her gut craved the heat of a drink or five.

"We go where the money goes, Kutttyr. That's our job. Don't make it more than it is."

The mood in the car was heavy. It wasn't exactly an argument, more of a moral conflict that was irresolvable between them. Ren faced the window, jaw tight. Andi sighed. She nudged him again, harder. "And don't be such a fuckin' downer. You're way prettier when you crack a smile instead of this brooding shit."

Ren shook his head, but Andi noticed the indent of a dimple in his cheek.

"Hey. Kin is kin." Andi reminded him with a pointed look.

He flicked his gaze to her, eyes tired.

"Sure. Whatever. Kin is kin."

* * *

Lockjaw, shoved between a nail salon called *DIVA HAVEN* and a street-food joint selling overpriced yakitori, was packed full of sweaty bodies and inebriated laughter. Neo-Shibuya was roaring. Strobe lighting forged the skeleton of the building; a kaleidoscope of garish neon painting faces in bursts of manic colour. Graffiti defaced the booths and tables arranged haphazardly, empty bottles and shot glasses stacked into laughable imitations of the Spires.

Andi and Ren shoved through the crowd, liquor clotting underfoot. She ignored the usual catcalls and the stench of stale alcohol prickling her skin.

The barmaid was short with chrome plated ears modded to appear elfish. She eyed Ren with a flirtatious hunger that Andi immediately scoffed at.

She slapped down a couple of notes with more force than necessary.

“Two beers.”

They arrived fast, the dirtied foam sloshing around the rim of the glasses.

Ren took a long pull of it, throat working, eyes closed in momentary bliss.

Andi sipped her own. “You know how many men would rip your optics out to get a drink bought by me?”

Ren laughed. He wiped his damp lips with the back of his hand. “Yeah, yeah. I count my blessings’ every damn night.”

They drank fast. A couple of contacts and friends joined them. The place was bustling with punks and killers.

By her fourth drink, Andi’s hair was loose. A thin sheen of sweat dampened her forehead. She was bent over the pool table, schooling some old-timer punks who paid her ten kin for a game.

By her sixth, she was pressed up against the solid muscle of Ren’s torso. The dive was loud, an old-world hyperpop track glitching through the cheap speakers as they swayed. His hands were everywhere, his breath hot against her neck. She tilted her head up, grinning, her eyes catching the warm brown of his. She doesn’t remember who initiated it, only that she knew that she couldn’t stop.

After the eighth, they left together. The others watched them with knowing looks, optics tracking them with intrusive curiosity.

Andi didn’t remember much afterwards.

* * *

Morning slugged through Ura-Shinjira like bile from a smoker’s throat.

Threads of crimson tinged with bruised green settled over the city, a washed-out curtain over the neon lights and jagged ends of the Underbelly.

Andi blew from her stimstick languidly. She stood in her underwear, gazing out the window with an expression halfway between disdain and acceptance. She watched chrome-capped cars roll through the streets, punks hustling to stay above the dirt another day.

After a few minutes she began to zone out, colours and shapes melting into watery broth as she exhaled deep, unfocused. Her eyes brought her back, glinting, reflecting off the dirty pane. Jade and unfamiliar, sharp as blades. They always looked paler because of her hair. Dark as onyx. It fell like ink rolling from the lip of its ceramic pot, past her collarbones, feathering at the small of her back. Andi liked it. Liked being wrapped in a cloak that made everything tempered, contained, abstruse.

Smoke from her stick coiled past her cutting gaze, unwinding in odd shapes like powdered milk into instant coffee. A kid yelled a string of cusses below. People didn’t talk, they hollered. Sirens blared unwaveringly. Metal clanged. The city never slept.

Behind her, Ren was still unconscious, snoring faintly. One hand was fisted in his hair like he was fighting himself in his dreams. He often acted that way – coiled inward like a seashell, shoulders hunched like he was shielding his body from an invisible blow. Andi watched the thin silvery augments at his temples pulse in metronomic intervals. White light from the window warmed his tan skin. He looked free like this. Plum coloured bite marks bloomed along his neck and collarbone, and Andi felt her chest tighten. She rolled her eyes and flicked the stick out onto the sidewalk below.

Ren was a bad habit.

She scowled at him and began to gather her clothes off the floor, cursing under her breath when she couldn’t find her boots underneath the junk.

“You leavin’ already, Von Heller?”

She turned. He sat up blearily, his eyes raking down her half-naked figure

in a way that was far too intimate for her liking.

“You fuckin’ mind?” Andi snapped. She pulled her tank top over her head hastily.

Ren yawned as he flopped back down onto the mattress. “Quit frontin’ like we don’t run the circuit every week.”

Andi muttered something that resembled *smug little fuck*.

“Jus’ stay a little longer.”

Ren always did this. He seemed to have the idea that they could pretend that this was all allowed. They’d fought countless times over it; between silk sheets, between the tendrils of steam rising from ramen bowls, between debriefs where they’d be bleeding out, breathless with overexertion and looped out on chemicals. Andi would cut him off sometimes, call him names: *naïve, framefucked, insane*. Ren knew far too much and nothing at all. He walked away every time and she’d stare at his back until the city’s teeth swallowed him up. She didn’t do close. What they already had was jarring enough, the messy webs of their almost-ness. She felt them on her skin, sticky and persistent, drawing her back to the possibility of *maybe*. Andi only did absolutes.

“Go back to sleep,” she muttered, fastening her belt. “Some of us got kin to earn.”

Ren laughed lowly. “You’re real mean in the mornin’.”

“I’m *only* real. And I’m ghostin’.”

“Loop me.”

She shouldered her bag and gave him one last look. This couldn’t keep happening.

Andi opened her mouth and a pathetic “*See you, Kutttyr*,” came out. She turned, betrayed by her own tongue, and slid the metal door shut like it’d burned her.

* * *

Andi always believed that it was a miracle that God’s green earth was still breathing.

The air down here was constantly warm and damp, ripe with spilt chemicals. Life seemed to be stuck in a perpetual state of dusk, sealed above by the Takakō platforms cradling the Spires in their cool metal palms. She was hauled out of Ren’s apartment block by a surge of filth smothered wind. Andi slid her shades on immediately and pulled her hood up. She shoved her hands in the pockets of her leather jacket and began moving, twisting into the snake-like spiral of the Kurobashi Strip.

The streets were alive with an upheaval of metal and engines. She passed doorways where kids crouched, hands cradled with empty hope as they stared with hollow eyes. A group of older women draped in colourful headscarves gathered around a gold-plated shrine box. They took turns scanning the QR code with their holos, uploading digital prayers into the device. Andi imagined their words dismantling themselves into pixelated shards, pious beliefs trapped in shiny shells of code. Faith was an odd thing. Andi had seen images of doves and yellow haired angels before, read snippets of anonymous scripture, but it all seemed unbelievable. If God was real, he was a computer.

At Karasu Café, Andi bought their strongest roast and downed it in three heavy gulps. Her mind idled back to Ren. She wondered whether he was also drinking coffee, the shitty blend he always offered her. Maybe he was thinking about her too.

Holo-ads plastered on rusted building fronts glitched between vivid images: pop idols with cotton-candy dyed hair and decora drenched outfits, Frutiger aero-esq ponds filled with unfurling lotus flowers and neon koi fish, the latest models of PleasureBots pursing their pink lips and arching their smooth spines. Noise was a tidal wave. You moved against it in the Underbelly. Quiet was a luxury. Voices amalgamated into a song of hysteria and underneath humanity was the constant hum of the machine.

Andi slipped from the junction into the Dogenzaka-Lowline, her own turf. Bikes threaded through pedestrians on narrow side streets where drunks stumbled out of doorframes with pupils widened into flying discs.

Streetsirens loitered on corners, willowy limbed and dopey, searching for their next prey. They looped strings from beaded curtains around their fingers, paper bills stuffed in lace-trimmed bra cups. There was always a constant supply for them to chew on, churned out from dive bars, packaged up willingly with shapeless desire in their guts. The girls laughed as they dragged them into their low-lit, velvet dens. The sirens were arguably the most harmless of the hustlers prowling the streets. It was easy to catch a blade in the ribs by some punk having a bad day, and even easier to cover up. If you were Underbelly-born you started to rot from the moment your first scream pierced your throat and joined the chorus. Most people stunted the decay with augments – cyberware and implants interwoven with tender flesh, gums ripped of pearls and replaced with iron fangs. To be human was to be weak, a bruised fruit softening amongst its polished competitors. Evolution was imperative.

The chaos of Scrapper's Row was unparalleled. A group of teens dispersed around her like birds in the wake of human footsteps. They were pictures of youthful impudence – hair painted with neon cheetah print or streaks of silver tinsel that reflected the bleeding colours of the holograms. Piercings glinted from tongues, browbones, medusas and septums. They laughed loudly, linking arms once they swept past her, high on low-grade stimulants and futile optimism. Andi hustled past a stall frying synthmeat, wafting sweet teriyaki sauce and soy as the seller flipped a rusted pan. Her stomach rolled with hunger. Vendors advertising cheap flashing accessories yelled *special discount*, grinning at the kids that snatched at them with congenitally greedy fingers. Above her, condensation dripped down from sweating utility pipes, smearing one of her glasses' lenses.

Andi kept her head down. She was used to being recognised. Her street cred was far too high to avoid dissection from prying eyes. Some kid tried offering her a folding fan decorated with leaping tigers and rolling blue waves.

"Ten kin. C'mon pretty lady, you look hot."

Andi stopped and almost humoured the kid, who couldn't be more than fourteen. She clocked the hilt of a vibroblade tucked into his baggy jeans, the hunger that pulled his skin taut against bone. For a moment, she wondered if he was gang affiliated, her eyes searching for ink on his exposed forearms. He lifted his chin and stared back, defensive.

"Yo, lady. You buyin' or tweakin'?"

Andi waved a hand dismissively. She disappeared into a darker side street and checked her holo for the time.

A gift was waiting for her.

Sydney Greene

STRANGE TREES

Abr. Chapter 1

The cold metal soothed Henrietta as she drew small circles under the window beside her thigh. She was smooshed in a seat with Mama, headed to Meridian, Mississippi. Mama had yelled for her to pack a bag this morning, and soon after their neighbor was driving them to the bus station. They passed pursed thin lips and averted gazes as they fought with their bags heading towards the back. Henrietta was eyes down and quiet like Mama told her. They didn't want trouble on the three-hour journey – especially after last night. Henrietta was sure this was why she was being shipped off to God knows where.

The summer had been uneventful, but Mama was strict on Henrietta not leaving the house. Violence downtown was worse each day, but it'd come to a head last night when the house across the street was set on fire. Mama had just got home from work when they heard the crash, the squeal of tires. She dashed into the kitchen where Mama was shutting the door and putting her cigarette out.

"Shit! What the hell was that?" Mama said.

She pushed Henrietta behind her and shut the lights off, standing motionless in the back of the house. The only light came bleeding in from the flames devouring the Williams' house across the street. Chaos ensued shortly after. Voices were loud, some in terror and others barking orders to fight the fire.

"You ain't staying here, Henrietta," Mama said as they sat on the kitchen floor. Her face was expressionless, staring straight ahead, ignoring Henrietta's reaction.

"But Mama ion wanna leave you here, we could both..."

"You leaving tomorrow and that's that," she interrupted, "I can't lose this

job and it ain't safe for you here. I'll see if Lucille can cover me tomorrow so I can take the bus with you, drop you off in Meridian."

Henrietta knew better than to talk back, especially with that tone in play.

* * *

They weren't long on the bus before she wished the ride was at an end. The novelty of leaving home for the first time had worn off and she thought she would die of boredom. Mama had fallen asleep soon after the bus left. Henrietta knew there was no way to reach the books packed in her bag without waking her mama, who was exhausted. It seemed she had only her imagination for entertainment.

Her heart jumped as the bus pulled off the exit to the rest stop. Stretching her legs would be just what she needed. As she moved to get off the bus with everyone else, Mama woke and put her arm out to block Henrietta's path.

"Where you think you going?"

"I just want to go outside Mama."

She quickly shook her head, "*They* get off and get them a pop. *We* stay here on this bus so it don't leave us."

Henrietta's shoulders fell in defeat, and she sat back down.

"What's in Meridian anyway that's so special you sending me down there?"

Mama gave a stern look in response to Henrietta's sass but let it go without comment.

"You going to stay with your Aunt Pearl, my mama's sister."

Henrietta internally gawked at her Mama's words. Her grandma? Mama never talked about any family. She had never met anyone related to them. At birthdays or holidays it was usually just the two of them. Of course, people from the neighborhood and friends from school, but no one they shared blood with.

"How come we never came down before?"

Mama said nothing but looked away. She seemed to be having an internal dilemma. "Girl you know I'm tired, let me get some more sleep before we get there." She rested her head on the seat and closed her eyes.

Henrietta pressed down her annoyance at her mama's guardedness. What was the issue? She couldn't figure why Mama was being so aloof instead of telling whatever story seemed to be beneath the surface. If Mama wouldn't tell her she hoped whoever she'd meet in a couple hours would be more forthcoming.

* * *

She finally managed to wiggle a book out of her bag and spent the rest of the journey hurriedly flipping pages before they arrived at their destination. They'd merged off the highway, so she was sure they were getting close. Mama woke soon before they pulled into the bay but remained silent. After everyone made their way off the bus, they did the same and found themselves in a crowd of family reuniting and being whisked in different directions. Henrietta looked around and prepared to be bored for the rest of the summer.

The bus station stood alone in what looked like the middle of nowhere, starkly different from the bustling city that was her home. The slower pace was a surprise, but what took her breath away was the heat. It was hot in Birmingham for sure, but three hours driving south made quite the difference. The humidity made crossing the empty lot feel like wading through water. Then she looked up, and her eyes locked on a beautiful woman leaning against a baby-blue Chevy.

"Come on baby, this way," said Mama.

The stranger was dressed in a green fitted skirt and matching blouse. Her hair was cut short in a fashionable mini afro, her skin a warm brown, a bit darker than Henrietta's. She shone in the summer sun.

"Hey cuz!" she said in a rich voice. Her smile was wide and bright.

"Betty." was Mama's only response.

Henrietta was surprised at Mama's cold greeting. Being polite to everyone had been beat into her, and this was how Mama was talking to someone who was family?

Betty was unfazed. She looked down at Henrietta.

"And you must be Miss Henrietta! We're mighty happy to have you down here with us."

Henrietta felt nervous under Betty's gaze and a shy smile was her only

response. Betty was probably the same age as Mama, but she seemed less burdened, brighter. Henrietta couldn't place the difference, but it was there.

"Since your Mama ain't got no manners," she said, reaching out to the girl. "I'm your cousin Betty. Your mama told you about me?"

Henrietta winced at the harsh words which were in contrast to the soft, open look on her cousin's face.

"No ma'am," she said.

She returned the handshake and marveled at the deep red nails that shone in the sun. Henrietta looked at her Mama and found a tight line where there would be a smile if she had remembered her manners. Betty nodded and looked at Mama with a grim expression. A disapproving shake of her head was the only indication of what she might be thinking.

"Well y'all must be tired, won't you go head and throw your bags in the trunk and we'll head to the house."

Passing through what Betty called "downtown," Henrietta knew this town was a fraction of the size of Birmingham. Her circumstances started to set in. She would be here for the entire summer, maybe longer. That was up to Mama. She had lost her ability to speak on the bus, and she'd been quiet the entire car ride. Henrietta was annoyed with her. Bad enough she was dropping her off for the entire summer with this stranger, and now to just go silent when she needed her... It was becoming upsetting.

The only noise in the car was air whistling through windows and Betty pointing out landmarks. Henrietta admired the landscape, even though it was not much and all spread out, few and far between. The trees they did pass were myriad rich greens and reached higher than she could see from the window.

After what seemed like forever, they pulled into a long dirt driveway with a large white house at the end. Henrietta's eyes widened in shock. Surely this wasn't their final destination? This was the largest house she'd ever seen. The black shutters stood stark against their white background, and the large wooden porch wrapped around the house with a swing moving in the passing wind.

Betty stopped the car right in the front.

"Here we are! Why don't y'all head inside and I'll grab your bags."

"We can carry our own bags, Betty," Mama responded.

An exasperated sigh was Betty's reply. Henrietta's bag was weighing her down as she stomped up the creaking steps.

Betty opened the door and called out, "Mama, Shirley, they here."

Henrietta took in her new surroundings and fought to keep her mouth from dropping open. The front door opened into a large sitting room with a huge stone fireplace. The furniture was covered in florals and a thick sheet of plastic that Henrietta was sure her thighs would be sticking to considering how hot it was already, in June. To her left she saw the doorway to the kitchen but couldn't get a good look. She didn't want to wander the house alone, so she continued to survey the sitting room. There were lamps, and pictures littering the walls with frozen moments of what she assumed was family. A table with candles, pictures and herbs stood before the fireplace. It was strange to see a table in the middle of the room like this. She was about to ask Betty when she heard footsteps coming down the stairs.

It was a lighter-skinned woman in blue pants and a white blouse. Her lips were pursed as she took in her guests. Henrietta felt nervous all over again, but this time it was not soothed by Betty's warm personality. She stood with her shoulders back and eyes alert.

"Mary," the woman said after what seemed like hours of appraisal.

"Shirley," Mama replied.

"Shol can tell y'all family from the way you talk. That's my sister Shirley!" Betty called from the kitchen.

This brought a quick smirk to Shirley's face that was gone so fast Henrietta wondered if she'd imagined it.

Shirley looked down at Henrietta. "You must be Mary's girl."

Not a question. A statement that offered none of Betty's excitement. Henrietta wondered if Shirley didn't want her there. She didn't think her coming down would be stepping on toes, but now she thought there might be an issue. It's not like she even wanted to be here. This was Mama's doing.

"Yes ma'am," she said.

Shirley reached out a hand, and Henrietta immediately forced her face into a blank expression in spite of the shock she felt. Shirley's fingers were a deep blue from the tips of her fingers all the way to the knuckles, clearly dyed with some sort of ink. She knew from Shirley's demeanor it was not

a cosmetic decision. Henrietta had not seen anything like it and mentally noted that Betty's hands weren't dyed in the same way.

Then an older woman slowly descended the stairs. Her dark skin contrasted with her rich purple house dress and the matching scarf protecting her hair. Shirley moved quickly to offer assistance, but the woman waved her away. Henrietta noticed the deep set wrinkles in her face, the prominent laugh lines on the sides of both eyes, the way she braced herself as she made her slow way down, one hand on the rail, the other softly planted on the wall under the cascading line of family photos.

"Well I don't believe it, Mary Sue in the flesh," she said in richly deep voice.

Shirley moved to give the woman some room, and Henrietta watched curiously as the woman stopped in front of Mama, who no longer had the impassive look she'd worn when greeting Shirley and Betty. An icy stare was in its place.

"Hey Aunt Pearl, I sure do appreciate you taking my girl in."

Mama's words were grateful, but her tone sounded anything but.

Aunt Pearl gave Henrietta a warm smile and winked. She seemed completely unaware or unoffended by Mama's brash tone.

"You know you and yours always been welcome down here."

Mama let out a small scoff. Henrietta was sure they must be in backwards town. What was happening that Mama would behave like this?

Aunt Pearl's eyes stayed locked on Mama as she called out, "Betty why don't you take Henrietta upstairs so she can set her bag down and get settled while I talk to her mama."

Betty emerged from the kitchen. She removed the white apron she was wearing over her clothes, hanging it on a hook on the back of the door.

"Come on follow me Miss Henrietta," Betty said before starting to head up the stairs.

Henrietta plopped her bag on her shoulder and followed. As she moved to leave, Mama and Aunt Pearl were still looking at each other, not saying anything. The room was thick with tension, almost as thick as the humidity that choked her as she made it to the second floor.

She was out of breath as she turned to follow Betty around the banister overlooking the downstairs and continued down the hallway. Most of the white doors were closed except one she passed whose door was cracked open. She tried to catch a look and keep up with Betty but she couldn't

make anything out but swore she felt a tingling start at the crown of her head as she passed and stopped just as abruptly.

"You go ahead and put your stuff down here." Betty said, stopping a couple doors down from the room she noticed.

The room was pretty standard with a twin size bed, a floral quilt at the end, a small closet, and a singular nightstand with a small lamp.

"I got to get back to making dinner for tonight but just get yourself situated and come down when you're ready." She said with a smile and turned to go back the way they'd come.

"Um Betty?" Henrietta said shyly.

She stopped and turned to Henrietta.

Henrietta battled within herself about whether to ask about the weirdness happening downstairs but her anxiety got the best of her and she decided against it.

"Uh what's for dinner?"

"Well it's always a blessing to have family back together ain't it?" She said smiling, "Cause for celebration! Making everything good: fried chicken, black eyed peas, greens, fried green tomatoes, and cornbread."

Henrietta's mouth watered at the thought and her stomach gurgled in anticipation. She didn't realize she was starving, guess that bus sandwich was long gone now. Eaten up by the adrenaline of high tensions and constant heat that hadn't let up since she got off the bus.

"Y'all got chow chow?"

Betty laughed, "I think I'll be able to find you some in the food closet. Asking for chow chow? Maybe your Mama was raising you right after all."

With that she turned on the balls of her feet and headed to the kitchen. Henrietta dropped her bag in the room and plopped down on the bed. She immediately felt the call of sleep as her body sunk into the soft mattress.

She was looking up at the ceiling light, blinking up at it and letting today's events flow through her mind. When all of a sudden she was waking up on the bed. Hours had passed, the room was much darker than when she had apparently fallen asleep. She'd fallen asleep with her legs dangling off the side but now she was laying properly with her head propped on top of a pillow. The door had been shut and her bag, before forgotten in the middle of the room, was tucked neatly by the closet.

Mama must've come to check on her and found her asleep. Henrietta hoped Mama was in a better mood now, and that maybe all the weirdness was from being back home so suddenly had gone away.

She wasn't sure of the time, but didn't want to make a lot of noise if everybody was already asleep. Henrietta winced as the door creaked while she tried to open it slowly. There was no one in the hallway as she peeked her head out and didn't hear anyone talking downstairs. She walked on her toes as she slipped down the hallway and down the stairs.

As she made her way down she saw Aunt Pearl, sat in a chair before the table in the middle of the room. Her eyes were closed and her mouth was moving quickly but she didn't make a sound. Henrietta froze on the steps and watched, ducking behind the banister to conceal herself. Aunt Pearl continued, her slanted hands covered her eyes and Henrietta watched as Aunt Pearl began to rock back and forth in her chair.

Henrietta's throat was dry and fear started to creep into the back of her mind with a slight panic growing in her chest. She wasn't sure she should be watching whatever was happening but she couldn't look away. What was Aunt Pearl doing? Henrietta had never seen anything like it before. She was thinking about going to find Mama but wasn't sure which room she was in and didn't want to risk knocking on Shirley's door in the middle of the night.

Aunt Pearl continued to rock, and Henrietta stopped herself from jumping back as she saw the flames on the candles double in size. It was then that her body started to grow hot. This heat was different from the stuffy humidity she dealt with earlier. Now her entire body was heating at the same time, from the top of her head to the bottom of her feet. She jumped up in shock when she felt tingling at the crown of her head. As she moved, her foot stomped down on the stairs and Aunt Pearl immediately locked eyes on her. Her face was blank and in the dim light her eyes seemed to have a milky hue to them. Henrietta wasn't sure how Aunt Pearl would be able to see her in the dim light, but she was looking right at her.

Zhimeng Yang

BECOMING HER

Closing your eyes, you felt darkness flood your world.

Silence enveloped you as your consciousness sank into an endless abyss. Your body lay pressed against a hard surface, cold sweat prickling across your skin, while your fingers clutched desperately at the edges of the surface.

After a string of footsteps, a machine nearby started to operate. The beep-beep-beep sound pierced you like needles, and fear instantly took hold. Even with your eyes closed, a sharp, invasive light seemed to surround you.

Your grip tightened. The footsteps drew nearer. Your mind still struggled in the abyss, yet your body remained frozen.

A hand reached for you. You could feel it clearly. The latex-covered fingertips stroked your skin inch by inch, tracing the contours of your face as though reading a delicate painting. Slowly, deliberately, the touch moved from your smooth forehead down to the curve of your closed eyelids, across the straight bridge of your nose, over your soft lips, and finally along the clean line of your jaw. The entire process seemed like performing a ritual.

A moment later, a wave of pain spread through your body, accompanied by the pungent smell of medicine. Your body began to tremble instinctively until the hand with the glove came towards you again and held your shoulders.

'Don't be afraid.' A soft voice reached your ears through the haze, its words blurred and indistinct behind the mask.

It offered little comfort. The power of the machine intensified, and the scent of medicine thickened. Suddenly, you felt violently torn from reality, landing in your old bedroom. A man's rough hands yanked you from the

bed, hurling you into a corner of the room. He cast a fierce glare at you. Then, slowly, the corner of his mouth began to lift until it stretched into a terrifying smile.

You curled into a ball helplessly, trembling as tears welled in your eyes. Desperate flooding, you closed your eyes. Plunged into darkness, your consciousness began to drift away until the touch of that gloved hand and the gentle voice returned. They dispelled the terrifying figure before you, pulling you back to reality.

This time, the voice came through more clearly. 'It's over now.'

You wanted to respond to the voice, to form a word. However, your dry throat ached faintly, as if something were stuck inside. You drew a breath, slow and deep, to unravel it. The machine nearby powered down, and the medicine's smell faded gradually into the air.

* * *

In the office of the Wuxi City Police Department, Officer Xu was reviewing the case file of the latest missing person report, a slight frown on his face.

Just then, a knock sounded at the door.

'Come in,' Xu called out, looking up from the desk.

The door opened, and a young police officer, Chen, entered with a stack of organized files. 'Sir, here are the latest interview notes.'

Xu accepted the documents, taking a sip of his tea. His eyes lingered on the first page, and he tapped the paper with his finger. 'How is the husband of the missing woman, Ms. Lin? Has a time been rescheduled for him to come in for a supplementary statement?'

'We contacted him yesterday,' Chen replied, a hint of frustration in her voice. 'His emotions were still unstable, and his words seemed somewhat disordered. I think his condition isn't suitable for effective communication.'

'I understand,' Xu said, putting the materials down with a slight sigh. 'Anyone would struggle if their spouse went missing. The complicating factor is that Ms. Lin lost her parents early, and her immediate family and social network appear very limited. Currently, the breakthrough might have to come from her past connections.'

'Yes,' Chen continued. 'We've already contacted several of her uni

friends from Nanjing University...' She paused briefly before adding, 'They mentioned that Lin was quite popular on campus back then, due to her outstanding appearance and excellent academic performance.'

Xu was silent for a few moments, then spoke. 'Nanjing University... that's one of the top schools in the whole country.' He looked up. 'So, did you manage to get any useful leads from her uni friends?'

Chen replied, 'A few of them mentioned that Lin was a member of the student union. While they couldn't recall the exact details, they did remember that Lin frequently had conflicts with another member, Ms. Wen. And their relationship was quite tense.'

'Wen?' Xu's brow furrowed slightly. 'Do we have any current information on her?'

Chen nodded. 'Yes, we've conducted a preliminary check. Ms. Wen currently runs a small medical aesthetics clinic. We'd like your direction on whether to investigate further.'

Xu stood up immediately and grabbed his police uniform from the back of the chair. 'We can't afford to overlook any lead connected to the case. I'll go to the clinic with you and have a conversation with Ms. Wen.'

* * *

Another morning.

I opened the warm-yellow linen curtains in the reception room, and the bright sunlight slowly spilled through the window. I half-closed my eyes, and it occurred to me then: this was my seventh year in Wuxi. Winters here were usually mild, with rain lingering for days. This year, however, the sun seemed to show itself more often.

Having just finished the morning inspection of my work, I took off the gloves, washed my hands meticulously, and brewed myself a cup of coffee.

I sipped my coffee slowly, looking out of the window at the vehicles shuttling on the road.

Just at that moment, my doorbell rang.

I paused, a faint sense of unease brushing against my thoughts. The clinic had been closed for the past two weeks. Who could be looking for me now?

I opened the door. To my astonishment, two people in police uniforms

stood outside. My eyes swept over them quickly, landing first on the tall, lean middle-aged man—with his dark, slightly stubbled skin, deep-set eyes, and thin lips. Beside him stood a young woman.

'Good morning. How can I help you?' I put my coffee down.

'Are you Ms. Wen?' It was the woman with fair skin, delicate facial features, and thick glasses who spoke first.

As she did, the man beside her fixed me with a sharp, penetrating gaze. I could feel his eyes sweeping over the room behind me, inch by inch, as if his gaze could see everything through me.

'Yes, I am,' I said, my hand tightening its grip on the doorframe. 'Is something wrong?'

'Well, you can call me Chen. We're from the Wuxi Police Department,' the woman said, her gaze shifting toward the man beside her. 'And this is Commander Xu.'

I nodded slightly and waited for them to continue.

The female officer spoke again, 'We're here to ask a few questions regarding a current case. Would now be a convenient time for you?'

'Of course,' I replied.

She paused briefly before asking, 'Do you know a Ms. Lin?'

I thought for a few seconds, then said, 'Yes. We were at the same university.'

'Do you have any information about her recent circumstances?' The male officer named Xu finally spoke.

'Not really. We rarely met after graduation. Has something happened to her?' I asked.

Chen replied instantly, 'Yes, she's recently involved in a missing person's case. So, we are interviewing her acquaintances to find some leads.'

I was a bit surprised. 'A missing person's case? Is Lin missing?'

Chen nodded. 'The case is still under investigation. We'd appreciate your discretion.'

I lowered my gaze. 'That's so sudden... I hope she's safe.'

Hearing this, Xu leaned forward slightly, his eyes blazing with intensity. 'According to our investigation, you two had some...disagreements while working together in the student union?' His tone was even, but he deliberately paused on the word *disagreements*.

The air grew still for a moment.

'That was such a long time ago,' I said with a light laugh. 'We were too competitive back then. We held different opinions, each firmly believing we were the right one. Yet honestly speaking, those old memories have almost blurred.'

Chen gently said, 'I understand. But could you try to recall what your arguments were mainly about? Even one detail would help. Or is there anything that has stuck in your mind?'

The word arguments she used sounded particularly sharp. It seemed she had already assumed that Lin and I had such a tense relationship.

My throat felt dry. The two officers cooperated seamlessly. Xu applied pressure, while Chen pushed the conversation forward.

'Sorry, I really don't remember,' I replied to Chen's questions, shaking my head. 'If I had to say, it was probably trivial things like event budgets or scheduling. As you know, the student union is responsible for all those kinds of affairs.'

Xu studied me silently for a few seconds, his gaze seeming to verify whether what I said was true. Then, he handed me a card.

I took it. The card was cool and smooth against my palm. My eyes dropped to the print: *First Criminal Investigation Division, Wuxi Police Department*, followed by Xu's name and contact details in smaller font.

'Ms. Wen, thank you for your cooperation,' Xu said. 'If you remember anything about Ms. Lin, please contact us. Any detail, no matter how small.'

'I will,' I said, feeling Xu's attention shift back to my reception room once more.

Finally, they left. The moment the door closed, I leaned back against it. Only then did the tension in my facial muscles begin to ease.

The name *Lin*, like a key that opened a long-locked door within me. Back in the university, everyone said we were rivals. And actually, they weren't wrong. Lin was beautiful, proud, and confident. She believed wholeheartedly in love and never hesitated to give love to others. But I wasn't jealous. I just saw myself through her. Every time she presented the polished slides of her perfect proposals at the student union meeting, I could almost see the figure of her working through the whole night. Every time she shone brightly in a crowd, I seemed to detect, behind her flawless smile, a trace of well-hidden weariness.

To me, she was like a mirror that reflected too clearly—my own haste, my strain, all the vulnerabilities I never wished to see.

So I had to push her away to the position of a rival. Only then could I refuse to recognize myself in her figure, escaping from this silent, unrelenting self-scrutiny.

My thoughts gradually settled back into my body. I grabbed the nearby coffee and drained it. Only after several deep breaths did I feel the cold sweat on my skin begin to recede.

* * *

You had lost track of how many times you'd lain on this cold platform. You felt like a drop of water caught in a rushing stream, carried helplessly forward, lost in the loops of time. The only things that made you certain you were still alive were the dull, persistent ache in your face and the touch of the familiar hand.

The hand reached for you again, warm fingertips brushing your skin, gently peeling away the gauze until only the faintest veil remained before your eyes.

You struggled to lift your heavy eyelids. When the ceiling gradually came into blurred view, the warm glow of the lamp spread across your vision, yet for you, the light felt unexpectedly harsh. At the same time, you felt an invisible ache across your cheekbone. However, the ache was different from that of your old bruises. This pain felt alive, raw, and strangely vital, like the split-second ache of a seed breaking through the soil.

Feeling unsettled by this unfamiliar sensation, you closed your eyes once more.

'Don't be afraid. Just have a try,' a voice you knew well sounded beside you.

You tried opening your eyes again. Through the haze, you could make out the machines around you and a neatly arranged set of surgical tools on a nearby table. And the person, with a kind smile, was sitting beside you.

Almost instinctively, your gaze fell upon the person's hands. A sense of familiarity instantly flooded over you. You were certain that these were the same hands that had touched your cheek countless times, the hands that

had brought the only warmth to you.

You watched as that hand picked up a watering can and walked toward the windowsill. There stood a potted flower, almost withering.

The hand lifted the watering can. The sound of water flowing was clear in the silent room, each drop falling like a tap against your nerves.

Parting your dry lips, you felt a slight ache in your throat. After a moment, you finally found your voice. 'It's already dead... why bother watering it?'

The person didn't answer right away. The sound of water stopped. In the silence that followed, you heard the gentle, soft reply. 'Because I've witnessed it in full bloom, the entire process of its deepening hues, and even how each petal unfolded. I remember. So now, I can't just stand by and watch.'

These words struck your entire body again and again, clear and resonant.

Your gaze drifted downward, past your chest, along your arm, until it rested on your wrist. You noticed the bruise on it. Before, every glimpse of the bruise would remind you of that demon. It would linger around you, and the feeling of pain would echo through your body. But now, there, the bruises seemed to be slowly fading, and the scent of medicine that filled the air brought you an unexpected sense of calm.

Surrounded by warmth and comfort, you drifted into a deep, dreamless sleep.

* * *

Early that morning, Xu and Chen walked side by side. Both were silent, each seemingly lost in their own thoughts.

This was Xu's twentieth winter as a police officer in Wuxi. At twenty-two, he had graduated from one of China's top police academies and returned to his hometown, Wuxi, full of ambition. Starting as an ordinary officer in a neighborhood police station, he had worked diligently and earned his promotion to his current position as a Commander of the Criminal Investigation Team at the Wuxi Police Department. The cases he handled had shifted from trivial disputes to various criminal investigations.

Colleagues at the station always described Xu as capable and sharp. They often remarked that Xu's gaze could pierce through everything, even

the carefully constructed facades of suspects, straight to the truth.

But as a subordinate who had worked closely with Xu on several cases, Chen always felt that Xu was more complicated, or perhaps more nuanced, than he appeared. Chen had noticed, more than once, a faint and almost imperceptible heaviness in Xu's eyes when he looked at suspects. It wasn't like penetrating. It was more like a sinking, a slow descent into the eyes of those suspects or criminals—eyes that filled with regret, fear, and even a kind of despair, as if they themselves couldn't understand how they had ended up here.

So, Chen wondered if what Xu saw was never the so-called criminals, but ordinary people who had been pushed over the edge of fate. Xu's seeing carried too much weight, but he never spoke of it. He only used calm words in case files, or the quieter, lower-toned '*Let's move*' before an operation.

Chen broke the silence first, asking, 'Sir, what are your thoughts on Ms. Wen?'

Her voice seemed to pull Xu out of his reflection. Xu paused briefly before replying, 'To be honest, before we visited her, I was only thinking about not overlooking any potential leads. But now, I feel we should pay more attention to this Ms. Wen.'

Chen replied with a little confusion. 'Do you think Ms. Wen's behavior was suspicious?'

Xu shook his head. 'Not exactly... but for me, her actions and answers were too polished, and even somewhat rehearsed.'

'Like she'd prepared for it,' Xu added.

Chen nodded thoughtfully. 'Exactly. When we asked her about her relationship with Lin, her description was indeed vague.'

Xu said, his tone once again carrying the familiar efficiency, 'However, at this stage, we only have suspicions regarding Ms. Wen. Until we find any solid evidence or concrete points related to her, we should not take any action that might alert her.'

'One more thing,' Xu added. 'After we return to the station, check if we can obtain the CCTV around the area of Ms. Wen's clinic during the period of Lin's disappearance. Also, keep following up with Lin's husband and arrange for him to complete his statement as soon as possible.'

Chen nodded. 'I understand, sir.'

What truly gave Xu complicated feelings about Wen wasn't mere suspicion, but the painting he had glimpsed on the clinic wall during their visit.

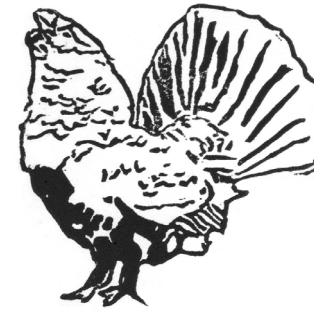
He had seen that painting before on Instagram, titled *Becoming*. When he'd come across it while scrolling, his gaze had unconsciously stuck to it. After some research, he learned the artist was a feminist named Susie Griffin. It wasn't unusual to see work like that in a medical aesthetic clinic, yet for some reason, seeing this piece at Wen's clinic impressed Xu deeply.

Would she harm another woman just because of some conflicts from the past?

The thought surfaced, and Xu pushed it back down just as quickly. Experience had taught him that between belief and action lies a grey area too deep to measure. One can wave the banner of redemption with one hand, and do something to harm others with the other hand.

Xu didn't mention the painting to Chen. After returning to the police station, he searched for the painting online again and studied it for a long time.

In the painting, a woman's body extended from blossoming flowers, her arms spread wide as if in welcome.



NON-FICTION

Frederick J Barrett

VOICES FROM MY TIME IN ANGOLA

*'Children in famine...and the whole world
Of loneliness, poverty, and pain make a
Mockery of what human life should be.'*

Bertrand Russell (What I Believe 1925)

November 1993. Luanda.

'Bem-vindo a Angola,' The passport control official slid my documents back to me and indicated that I could enter his country. I made my way towards the exit, longing to escape the oppressive stale hot air of the terminal. Two customs officers then stopped me and searched my luggage. I watched on. They became distracted by my duty-free cigarettes and graciously accepted a packet each. They allowed me to exit that cauldron at last.

As my eyes scanned anxiously around the noisy, colourful crowd outside the terminal, I expected someone to be waiting for me or holding up a sign, but nothing. Street children offered to carry my luggage, but to where? As the other passengers moved off in the arms of loved ones, I slumped onto a bench near the entrance, my luggage beside me. I felt alone, abandoned.

As the evening drew in, the street children got bored and wandered away, as though melting back into the undergrowth. The red dirt car park was overlooked from a distance by blocks of low-rise apartments, their balconies filled with washing and walls tattooed with graffiti. I watched the sun turn from a golden sphere to a crimson red weight as it fell gently from the sky and stretched the shadows. There was no breeze, just the dust that seemed to live and breathe, the residue of motion, departed cars and

humans. There was no dissipation in the still heat, but the rising calls of the cicadas were a portent for the arrival of twilight.

'*Senhor, it is not safe to travel in this Biarro after dark.*' My hubris collided with reality.

As we journeyed from the airport, the taxi driver skilfully weaved over and back, like a carousel, avoiding potholes and narrowly avoiding other old cars, bicycles and the *candongueiros*, the minibuses, the unofficial public transport. Those minibuses blew clouds of black diesel fumes onto the road and were invariably packed, with one or two passengers gripping precariously, with feet on the boarding step and bodies outside the open doors. I wondered if those travellers also paid a full fare.

With the war, there was no street lighting. But there were braziers on the sidewalks, where vendors roasted corn cobs and peanuts and sold them. The smell from the charcoal fires drifted in through the car window, teasing my hunger. The smoke provided light and shadow, mystery and always the suggestion of hidden danger. There were lights from the cantinas, music from boomboxes, and shadows that moved along the footpaths. In the winding streets, the car lights would illuminate people and shadow places, which returned to near darkness as we turned away. It was like travelling through the set of a black and white, evocative movie, bringing me to my new home.

* * *

23rd December 1993. Malanje

I wanted to visit the feeding centres to see first-hand what our team did. The buildings reflected the decay, the savaged landscape. I had not considered the thirty-degree oppressive heat, magnified by the corrugated tin roofs which intervened to block out the scorching sun. There were flies everywhere, the dull cries of hungry babies and staff imparting instructions, trying to maintain order. There was little medical equipment, just saline drips for the most dehydrated. Only children who are severely malnourished are admitted, the nurse explained. Many were extremely thin and emaciated.

'*Some children appear heavy and listless,*' she continued. '*They have*

kwashiorkor, a severe form of protein malnutrition, resulting in swollen and distended abdomens.'

I moved away. This was overwhelming emotionally. I had never seen so many children, so many mums, distressed and helpless. I saw a nutritionist, a very pretty girl, that I had been chatting up when she arrived in-country.

'*Hi*' I said gently, and I waited for her to finish with one child. She carefully lifted him out of the suspended weighing scales, and she planted him in my arms:

'*Here you are. This is who we are here for.*' She looked weary.

I did not know how to respond. This boy was so thin and light. His teeth were protruding as his cheeks had shrunk back his mouth. His dull round dark eyes were looking for his mum. His fingers were like thin claws weightless on my forearm. He had no interest in me. He smelled of papa. I smelt of cigarettes. His mother was lying on a reed mat on the floor, her hair thinned and matted beneath a faded scarf, her lips parched and dry, her flat chest and thin body almost unmoving and her dull eyes watching her son. Merry Christmas and peace be with you all, for there were 10,000 children in our feeding centres that day.

* * *

Early January 1994. Luanda hospital

We climbed the steps beneath the portico and pushed, with considerable effort, to open the thick wooden doors that were well over two metres tall and creaked audibly. It seemed dark inside, and it took moments for our eyes to adjust to the dim light. We pushed through another set of double doors, less formidable with cracked glass panes on top, and then we stepped into a long corridor. Our team had dropped a fourteen-year-old boy off yesterday, with a suspected dislocated shoulder and we wanted to check that he had been treated. I did not want to be here. It was Sunday. I feared airborne diseases, but I was the only translator available.

The hospital was almost silent, but as we passed the wards with doors wedged open or missing, we could see ravaged bodies lying on beds, amputees with stumps wrapped in once white bandages, patients with drips attached and others lying, unmoving, just staring at the lofty ceilings,

as though dead. There were no bedclothes, just an occasional sheet that provided a little privacy. The stale balmy air slept under the motionless fans. The electricity was off. There was a faint smell of disinfectant mixed with body sweat. The patients all looked emaciated in the dim light, and I became aware of a small pile of bloodied sheets discarded in a corner. I tried not to think about those sheets or what has caused those blood stains.

Occasionally, family members sat beside beds. Women wrapped in worn-out capulanas, a sarong type wrap, and head scarves soothed back into the nape of their necks. Their eyes were on their children, who looked even more pitiful, lying on oversized adult beds. Thin legs and arms dangled from nappies or shorts, with visible ribs that could almost be plucked. There were no toys here. The scenes reminded me of the desolate sketches of the workhouses, so familiar in Irish history.

'I hope you brought food with you,' the hospital worker smiled. 'The hospital has run out, so we can't feed the patients.' She now lowered her voice. *'In fact, we have very little medicine, and much of that gets stolen as well.'*

* * *

Early Feb 1994. Cuito

Antonov cargo planes look like oversized pigeons as they sit on the runway. As we buckled up for the five hundred and twenty km journey, the smell of engine oil mixed with maize kernels was pervasive, but not unpleasant. Flights were the only safe route to access our projects and as we slowly rose into the air, the first shafts of golden sunlight and shadows revealed the lush undulating terrain below, empty of life. Most families had been driven off the land and into the cities by war. An hour later, the bump of the tyres on the pockmarked runway as we landed, jolted me from sleep. The strapped in pallets of maize and other emergency food behind us held firm. We were unloaded with the food.

The tension was palpable as we drove from the airport. The road wound through the bursting green, the expanse of plants nurtured by overnight rain. The fresh earthy fragrance provided a heady perfume, a fleeting sensation, but ahead lay a small copse of trees and a checkpoint. The

checkpoint was nothing more than two tree branches laid across the road. Beside it were two armed youths sitting in the shade of a msasa tree. We eased to a halt before the sentries stirred themselves. One shuffled over to the car, his AK47 hung casually over this shoulder and held his hand out.

We slowly retrieved our *cartas de identificação*, identity cards, no sudden movements here. The driver passed them to the youth. No one spoke as though words might betray us as human. I glanced into the shaded area and saw soldiers relaxing, bazookas, heavy machine guns on tripods, with ammo belts loaded, all lying within reach. One soldier wore colourful cartridges, stuffed into a thick leather belt, wrapped around him, while others unarmed, lounged, smoking and leaned against a couple of Panhard M3 armoured personnel carriers, made in South Africa. These soldiers of UNITA were a complete contrast to the starving teens, fighting for the government. Until now, I had never really considered the weapons in use in this war and the power of their destruction.

These combatants were used to shooting and being shot at. They had known little else in their stunted lives. Their power came from those guns, never far away from them. Did they have wives, children, lovers, dreams? They looked benign and I tried not to stare. But these men would kill and hunt or be hunted and killed. What did they think of a couple of visitors passing them in a UN jeep? Just another day.

We passed through to Cuito city with its smashed buildings and empty looted shops. The main street was deserted. They were no street dogs. They had previously been killed or eaten by humans. During the siege, from January to October 1993, one third of the city's population died.

'There are fifteen thousand amputees in Cuito.' the deputy foreign minister George Chikoti later announced to the press¹.

I caught sight of a youth, six-foot tall with strong broad shoulders, good looking and of mixed race. He was moving slowly, swinging on his worn wooden crutches, one leg missing, blown away by a mine. His mother, a small, prematurely aged woman, was trying to walk in step beside him.

* * *

¹ Death of Dignity, Victoria Brittain, Guardian Newspaper

March 1994. Luanda, Cidade Baixa

The *Cidade Baixa* is the historic low lying city area, adjacent to the port. It is characterized by narrow streets, colonial era buildings, and dense commercial activity. There was a short burst of torrential rain, which made it almost impossible to see out of the windscreen. The force and noise of the rainwater on the car roof was deafening. Then it stopped and there was a moment of complete silence, as though nature was catching its breath.

We looked out at a lake in the road ahead, that had convened overnight. A long-nosed Chevrolet truck was making its way slowly towards us, weaving through the flood waters, diesel fumes pouring forth from the exhaust stacks, rising behind the driver's cabin. It sounded like an enraged bull as it ground steadily forward. We watched, trying to gauge the depth of the water, while spontaneous passengers waved from the back of the empty truck, grateful for their free lift to cross the flooded road. The truck driver grinned as he gently guided the truck past our stationary vehicle. The twin exhausts showered us with diesel fumes and the gear box ground as he started up the hill. Where previously there was a street with warehouses either side, there was now dirty water and ahead, we could see a door hanging off its hinges and dirty water swirling around the door post. The rain season always brought additional challenges.

'*Shall we keep going?*' my driver asked.

* * *

March 1994. Luanda

There had been shouting on the street near our office, so I raced downstairs, where a small group had gathered. I could see two little legs sticking out from under what looked like a big coat. One *chinela*, flip flop, violently twisted around a big toe and at an angle, the other run over and compressed by the recent pressure of a car wheel. The owner of these flipflops, now dead, was an eight-year-old boy, who had been hit by a battered old red Mitsubishi. Just as I arrived, the driver suddenly revved up and drove off, swerving to avoid the locals, who were banging on the car doors and windscreen. Mum hurled herself at the ground violently,

screaming, as though her pain could somehow lessen her son's pain. The observers dragged her to her feet and held her firm to stop her hurting herself further.

I stood there helpless.

'*Why did the driver not stop?*' I asked.

'Because the crowd would have beaten him.' My colleague reasoned.

* * *

April 21st, 1994. Ireland

'*Ashes to Ashes. Dust to dust.*'

And with that, the priest stepped forward. He bent low and with an ornate trowel, he gouged out a handful of wet soil and sprinkled it over the coffin, which was now lying at the bottom of the freshly dug grave. Wet soil plopped on shiny oak with a dull thud. In time, I thought, nature will break down the wood and devour the remains. The mourners, three hundred or more from this provincial town, were invited to throw soil or flowers into the grave. Few did. Most people stood motionless, encircling the grave, still in shock. They stared blankly ahead or cried into hankies, tightly wrapped around ice cold fingers on this unforgiving wet afternoon.

My mentor, my great friend, two years younger than I, was dead. He died of malaria. I had hugged him for the last time, before I transferred to Angola, a mere five months ago. He was buried in Ireland, with his Mozambiquan wife and two-year-old son in attendance.

* * *

June 1994. Angola

There was the clenching of mighty fists. They beat on the raw red earth. The vibrations rippled across the country. The rain season had ended. The FIFA world cup was in the group stages and provided a distraction, but of no consequence for these warriors. A missile had been launched into a crowd leaving Sunday mass, killing twenty-eight people. It was a warning for the inhabitants. Government troops were fighting their way towards

Huambo, which was held by UNITA, the violent opposition. Discussions between the UN and the affected charities became daily occurrences and those conversations were summarised and relayed, as though spidering out to Head Offices around the world.

‘What should we do?’ My director asked.

If aid flights stopped, then we would not be able to evacuate our expatriate teams. They would be trapped in Huambo and Malanje. But none of our expats wanted to be evacuated.

* * *

July 1994. Luanda

The evacuation of our expatriate teams was quickly followed by the cancellation of all UN aid flights and a resumption of war throughout the country. The expatriates felt that they had deserted their Angolan staff and left them to deal with the impending conflict. Malanje city remained in government hands. However, there was chaos in Huambo. Even the dogs in the street feared the impending attack by government troops and what havoc UNITA would unleash, if they were forced to retreat. The 300,000 citizens were trapped. The city was surrounded by minefields, UNITA controlled the roads, so there was no safe way for the citizens to escape. The attack was imminent.

‘What will happen to the citizens?’ I asked.

‘They will bear the brunt of the casualties and deaths, as always.’ Our man from Reuters responded. He had witnessed such outcomes before, numerous times, in this savage conflict.

* * *

21st July 1994. Angola

Most of our expatriate team were hastily reassigned to the Democratic Republic of Congo, where up to one million people had escaped with their lives, but little else, from the ethnic slaughter in Rwanda. This was the epicentre of the next emergency, and the aid agencies diverted resources

and appealed to donors for more funding. Our intervention in Angola was over for now.

‘What did we achieve?’ I asked of colleagues who were there. We saved lives and supported people whose world had been completely torn apart. We also bore witness and tried to bring world attention to this conflict, which outside forces had exploited, while refusing to take any responsibility, since the civil war started in 1975. These vignettes are extracts from my daily diary, compiled over the nine months that I volunteered in Angola. I was then reassigned to Mozambique, never to return.

* * *

Postscript

Princess Diana spoke as she visited Huambo in 1997.

‘I’m not a political figure. I want to highlight a problem that is going on all around the world.’

At that time, Angola was the most heavily mined country in the world. There were an estimated ten million anti-personnel mines laid, one for each inhabitant of that vast country. Her highly publicised walk through a cleared minefield was carried worldwide by newspapers and magazines. It helped draw global attention to the humanitarian impact of landmines. The Ottawa Treaty to ban anti-personnel mines was signed by one hundred and twenty two countries in December that year. The United States and Russia, two of the main actors in Angola, did not sign the agreement.

The end

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Amy is a queer, neurodiverse, disabled writer who has always had a love for imaginary worlds. She uses genre fiction to try to make sense of what it means to be human, and to understand the often-hostile world around her, writing fantasy, sci-fi, and horror. She has recently expanded from fiction into poetry, and also has non-fiction books underway about the odd characters she has met in a life on the edge of society.

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Born and raised in Manchester, Ella Hilbert graduated from the University of Manchester with a law degree before following her passion for creative writing. She writes uplifting romance stories, sometimes dabbling in fantasy, that explore family, healing, and love. She believes that stories don't have to be dark in order to be meaningful. Inspired by her love of travel, she hopes her stories transport readers to new places and offer them a cheerful escape.

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Over the year, Eustacia has been focusing on uncanny, atmospheric narratives, where uncertainties between life and death bleed into the surroundings. Her writings involve unconventional families and contorted expressions of love.

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Faith is a queer fiction writer from the North East of England, mundanely writing absurd situations. Trapped somewhere between Manchester and Darlington, she writes to guide herself through the dark uncertainty of life and to make sense of an ever more disconnected world. You can find her work in local anthologies, obscure zines, and her own half-empty notepads. Her works have been known to include themes, settings, plots, and characters.

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Felix Shearwood is a queer, non-binary writer, systems designer, artist and sewist. Born in the East Midlands, Felix moved to quiet Chapel-en-le-Frith after many years in Manchester and Plymouth. Their work focuses on the Gothic, transformation through trauma, and exploring how horror can help readers and writers understand themselves and the parts of their minds they'd often rather not look at. They are working on their debut novel while parenting an opinionated Pomeranian.

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Born and raised in Ireland, the youngest and most spoilt of seven siblings. I have spent many years writing as part of my profession, before entering into the world of creative writing. I read a lot of non-fiction and historical books, and my first novel is autobiographical, recalling people and events from my volunteering work in war-torn Angola.

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Rebecca Hurst

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