

THE MANCHESTER ANTHOLOGY



VOLUME FOURTEEN

'Full of surprises, provocations and delights' – Ian McGuire

**THE
MANCHESTER ANTHOLOGY
VOLUME FOURTEEN**

A Collection of New Writing

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FOREWORD

Sixteen years ago, when I was still a young writer, I interviewed Hanif Kureishi at the Southbank Centre. He was just a little older than I am now, and although we were talking about his most recent novel, the reappearance in it of characters from *The Buddha of Suburbia* made conversation extend to his debut novel. He said that while he could do more (because he knew more) as a writer than had previously been possible, something had been lost along the way: the energy of his early work. 'I miss it,' he said, wistfully. I know now that I was near the peak of my own energy as a writer and didn't entirely understand what he meant, but I do now, and this anthology is a fine reminder of how glorious the energy of early writers is, how it fizzes and crackles.

I say 'early' writers rather than 'young' writers because it really isn't about when you start but about how long you've been doing it. Something does get used up along the way, a truth evident to me in the course of the first half of 2024 as I was working my way through the first draft of my ninth novel and the students whose work you'll read here were bringing early drafts of their own work into class.¹ As this anthology goes to print I'm further in to that first draft than I was in January but I can't say I'm in any way a changed writer. But it's been astonishing to watch the students transform into more accomplished versions of the already impressive writers they were a few months earlier. It's my privilege to have seen earlier versions of the work presented here and know the intelligence, skill, and lack of ego that has gone into these re-writes. The path to this anthology is strewn with murdered darlings, entire troops of them. And what you have here isn't final product. In many cases it's second draft, in all cases it's written under the pressure of a submission deadline that came at the same time as many other end-of-year deadlines. I don't say this because I think

¹ I hesitated before writing 'students' because they deserve nothing less than the word 'writers.' But the writer in me doesn't like repeating a word too many times in the space of a few sentences and, also, it gives me a sense of pride to claim this wonderful group as my students.

there's anything in this anthology that needs to be excused or explained away, but because it excites me immensely to know the work here doesn't represent the limits of the writers' abilities, but rather showcases their potential and offers editors and agents the chance to be the ones to work with them during the next stage.

I've been teaching at the Manchester MA programme for the last seven years. This cohort is the last group I'll work with, because logistical concerns have compelled me to step away from the role. If I have one criticism of this group it's that they made the leave-taking even more difficult than I'd anticipated: it has been such a pleasure to work with them, laugh with them, be amazed by them.

Kamila Shamsie

18 June, 2024

SHORT STORIES

TANIA BANERJEE

Bride-seeing

When Charu was growing up in Alipore, power cuts were frequent during the monsoon. The brown ceiling fan in their two-storey house stopped rotating and it cut her *bhat-ghum* short – the post-lunch nap she took after clearing her plate of rice and curry. Her grandmother sat up on the bed, rubbed the sweat off her neck with her pink cotton saree and yawned, ‘Ah, thrice in a day now! Why pay the electricity bill anymore? Charu, let’s go to the terrace and get some fresh air. I’ll hear you sing. Wait, let me just grab a bowl of coconut oil.’

Her grandmother liked to hear her sing. In return, she oiled her hair, untangling the knots one by one. Charu ran with a worn-out brown sack, a jar of chillies and a bowl of oil. Her unruly black hair swayed behind her. Her large eyes sparkled with mischief. The hem of her blue frock rose and fell just above her knees, exposing her slender legs with a couple of tiny bruises on her knees. Her grandmother climbed up the stairs, yelling all the way, ‘Careful, don’t you break the jar! And don’t drop the oil!’

Charu pushed open the wooden door with a swift kick, revealing an open terrace. It was surrounded by rusted railings and potted plants. In a lone corner was stacked an easel with a chipped frame and wobbly legs. Dried paint flecks clung stubbornly to its surface, reminding Charu of the childhood afternoons she had spent painting on this terrace. She had to abandon her brushes as school exams and the relentless demands of tuition work piled up. The metal box next to the easel still held traces of colour – bold blues, fiery reds and deep greens. Charu glanced at the worn-out palette and then looked up at the blue sky. Bending over with a low sigh, she spread out the brown sack on the floor.

Her grandmother began to lay the chillies flat on the sack to dry. Under the sun, the streak of vermilion in the parting of her grey hair shone a bright red, mirroring the hot chillies. The wrinkles on her wide forehead

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deepened as she squinted her eyes under the bright rays.

Charu suddenly stopped in the middle of a song. 'Mammam, why don't *you* sing for me today? I've never heard you sing!'

'And that's because I never sing.' her grandmother smiled and looked away.

'But you were just humming to my song!' Charu exclaimed. 'Come on, when was the last time you ever sang?'

'Oh, no, no, I never sang ...'

'Never sang? I've seen your old harmonium in the attic forever. Always in that corner, full of dust and cobwebs. Maa was saying you brought it from your parent's house back in the Sunderbans ... Mammam, are you even listening to me? Leave the chillies, leave them. Come and sit here next to me.'

Her grandmother remarked, 'Don't be silly, Charu! I'm trying to get these chillies dried in the sun before it begins to pour.'

'So what? You tell me about that harmonium you brought from the Sunderbans,'

Her grandmother sighed. 'Ah, as impatient as ever!'

But the truth is, Charulata was patient everywhere else. She was never a talkative child in the classroom. When her friend brought a purple scented eraser after the holidays, Charu waited for thirty long minutes. The bell rang, marking the end of the History period, and only then did she softly ask, 'Can I smell your eraser, just once?' Returning home, no matter how badly she wanted one, she never nagged her parents to get her a scented eraser. She never nagged her parents for anything at all. As for her grandfather, he had been old and bedridden long before Charu was born. She would bring him his favourite milk biscuits, sit beside him to watch some TV, only to discover in the middle of a cricket match or a soap episode that he had dozed off. She would gently pull the blanket over his frail body, kiss him goodnight and tiptoe out of the room. But when her grandmother was around, Charu was a different girl – she ran haywire, screamed her lungs out and asked questions about everything under the sun. Now, at sixteen, nothing really changed.

So her grandmother finally let go of the chillies, wiped her hands on her saree and sat down with the bowl of coconut oil. Running her fingers through Charu's hair, she asked, 'You know what happens in the

Bride-seeing

Sunderbans? If it drizzles here, it pours there. If it pours here, it floods there. The Matla river, it was just near our little house. Turned violent during the monsoon. So much water – spilling the *ghats* – gushing everywhere. Do you know what Matla means, Charu? Frenzied, unrestrained, untamed –’

‘Uff, I know, I know. I’ve heard this story a thousand times,’ Charu interrupted. ‘Now tell me, when was the last time you sang?’ Sitting cross-legged with her blue frock pulled up to her thighs, she placed her chin on her palms, her elbows resting on her lap.

Her grandmother looked up at the clouds that were turning dark and darker. It would start pouring anytime now. ‘Forty years ago, when they came to consider me for marriage.’

‘Who?’ Charu asked.

‘The boy and his parents. They brought trays of sweet jalebis and silk sarees. And a warning – I couldn’t sing anymore.’

‘What do you mean? Like, ever?’ Charu asked, taken aback.

‘Ever,’ she responded calmly.

‘But why?’ Charu drew closer, rolling the end of her grandmother’s soft aanchal around her finger.

‘Your grandfather’s father, he made it clear on the first day itself, ‘But my child, no singing after marriage, alright? No bride from a house like ours goes around whistling and waving her waist in town.’ I still remember his voice, like it was just yesterday ...’

‘And what did you say?’

‘What did I say? Nothing. Nothing at all. When he said this, he was so gentle, but so steady, you know – *just* like his son – the only man allowed to touch me ...’

Her grandmother dipped her fingers deep into the bowl of coconut oil. Charu bit her lips and began to speak. ‘Mammam, I’ve gone through your wedding albums so many times. And for some strange reason, I always thought I knew everything about you ...’

Her grandmother rubbed her shoulders. ‘Well, you’re not the only one.’

‘What does that mean?’

‘I also feel like I know everything about you – how you sneak out of your tennis class to meet that boy from school; how you like it when I add an extra dash of mustard in the pomfret curry; how you steal at least five *gulab jamuns* before the guests arrive. What? What are you staring at, you

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don't steal them?' A soft breeze brushed against the coconut trees and a few ripe coconuts, with mushy white flesh inside, came tumbling down. 'But there's this one thing I keep wondering about: why do you want this oil every afternoon?'

'Just like that. And I never steal five *gulab jamuns*. Two at max, I swear,' Charu chuckled.

'Can't be just like that. You can miss anything in the world, but this? Never, not a day. Why?' she teased, untangling a stubborn knot in Charu's thick black hair.

'My hair. Frizzy hair.'

Her grandmother shook her head while massaging the oil all over Charu's scalp. 'Your wounds. Deep wounds.'

'It's just that ...' Charu paused and then went on, 'Some nights, I can't sleep. The oil, it sort of, helps.'

'And?' her grandmother asked, gently stroking her neck. 'It's your mother, isn't it?'

Glancing at her, Charu asked, 'Why, why my mother? Why can't you ever think it's your son?'

'I didn't say that, did I? What has he done?'

Biting her lower lip, Charu let out a sigh and replied, 'He is sleeping with someone.'

'Oh ...'

'What do you mean, 'Oh'? You know something's going on, you know it very well. You just pretend you've got no idea, don't you?'

A subtle frown creased her grandmother's forehead. 'I've heard, yes, but I'm not sure. Who knows what the truth is, anyway?'

'I do. And the truth is, your son is sleeping with someone. The girl works at a salon, way younger – probably half his age. Every time, *every* time he fights with my mother, you know what she says? She says she should've killed me right away in her womb and just, just left this monster of a man. And she's right, she is right. I can't ever blame her. I mean, who can?'

'And?'

'And that obviously stings. That, th-that never goes away ... not even for a tiny moment. And I can't stand the colour of the tap in our bathroom – it's such a grisly red! And I hate the heat, and I swear, global warming

scares the shit out of me.'

'And?'

'And on my ninth birthday ...' Charu's voice trailed off. She clenched the fabric of her frock, with her gaze fixed at a distant coconut tree.

'What about your ninth birthday?'

'On my ninth birthday – my art teacher – he took me to the bathroom – no one knows. No one knows about my insomnia, my mother's depression, my father's stupid affair, the trauma accumulating in the lonely ozone layer – its gaping hole, wide, wider – like my nine year old thighs held far apart – don-don't do this, Mammam, why do you do this ...'

As the gusts of chilly wind hit the coconut trees, they swayed to and fro like old ghouls. A sudden storm broke out and the rain came pouring down. Charu touched her drenched face and pulled back the oily strands of hair that clung to her skin. 'He left the tap water running so no one could hear me scream. I don't think I screamed at all. The bathroom floor was so watery, it rubbed off all the blood that ran down my legs. As if, as if it never happened, nothing really happened ...'

'Me too,' whispered her grandmother.

'But you said no man touched you –'

'Except your grandfather.'

Charu looked up. Her grandmother looked back at her. Under the rainy sky and the roaring thunderstorms, she wrapped her arms around Charu and covered her head with her *aanchal*. She clasped her so close, as if they were breathing in just one body. The chillies got drenched without a care in the world. Soaking wet, Charu sat still, her face dug into her grandmother's bosom, and neither of them moved an inch.

For the first time in over seven years, Charu picked up her paintbrush that evening. She broke open the clay jar where she saved her pocket money. Kneeling down, she picked up the broken pieces of clay from the terrace floor and then counted the coins. She ran to the local stationery stall to buy some fresh paint and a clean palette.

The raindrops pattered on the windowsill in her room. Her nimble fingers trembled as she dipped the brush into the palette and the colours began to swirl. The first stroke felt foreign, as if her fingers were learning their mother tongue all over again. The rain died down a little, and in the quiet of the night, Charu stood in front of the old easel, staring at her

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painting. When birds began to sing at dawn, she tiptoed to the terrace. The cold air brushed against her palms with colours smeared all over them, and in that moment, Charu knew she wanted to paint again, and that she deeply wanted to leave.

With an art fellowship from London, Charu left Alipore the next monsoon. She painted day and night during her undergraduate years. She hated it when someone asked her at exhibitions, 'What's your painting about?' Sometimes, just sometimes, when she really liked an artwork, she couldn't resist the urge to walk up to the artist and ask, 'What's your painting about?' She would talk to strangers from all over the world about the strangest artworks that fascinated her. She would strike a conversation with the most interesting people on the tube; she would share tiny details of her art, of her student life, and once in a blue moon, of her grandmother, her terrace, her rainy load-shedding nights back in Alipore.

During her final year, one wintry morning, Charu's grandfather died in his sleep. The women in their colony helped her grandmother break the *shakha pola* bangles dangling around her wrist. Then they rubbed a soap bar over her head till all the vermillion got washed away.

At night, in a house full of grieving relatives and neighbours, Charu returned home. Her crisp white shirt was tucked into a pair of high-waisted blue trousers. Her hair was longer and the ends were dyed in a deep shade of burgundy. Her mother got a carton of milk to make lassi for the guests and cracked open a packet of salty biscuits.

All of a sudden, her grandmother, clad in a new white saree, ran up to the terrace as if her body had been set on fire. Mr Halder dropped the glass of lassi from his hand and screamed out, 'Oh, no! She's going to kill herself! Stop her, run!'

So they all ran up to the terrace, but she had disappeared. From the attic, they could suddenly hear a faint voice. Charu's grandmother was sitting in front of the old, dusty harmonium and singing softly, growing loud, then louder. Everyone stood in front of the attic, watching her.

'So much grief ... poor thing has lost her mind ...' said a distant relative.

Her grandmother had picked up a jasmine garland from the funeral flowers and tied it around her hair. Her songs were flowing into the night. The moonlight peeped into the attic, gliding softly through the empty parting of her hair, and the string of white jasmines glistened like pearl

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nacre in the face of life and death.

‘Oh, God! Get her a sip of water at least, let her mourn,’ someone sighed. Then they all sighed. Only Charu stepped into the attic, sitting behind her grandmother and slowly oiling her hair.

‘Look, Charu, I’m singing.’

Charu dabbed the coconut oil behind her grandmother’s ears, on her thick hair and her soft neck, while her grandmother kept singing till the end of the night – unrestrained, like the waters of her Matla river. She only paused once in a while to say, ‘Look, Charu, I’m singing! Look. Charu? I’m singing.’

NATALIE GUARINO

The Detour

Somewhere nearby, a bird was chirping, though the mother and her son did not hear it because the car windows were closed. She drove just slightly under the speed limit even though it was a small neighbourhood, and no one was out, not even on the chalk-covered sidewalks.

The mother was thin, perhaps too thin, and her bony knuckles rested over the steering wheel in a way that suggested she was relaxed; but she wasn't really. Her son sat in the back seat, not the one behind his mother, but the one behind the passenger seat. No one sat there. The mother could see her son in the rear-view mirror, his brown curls falling over his forehead, his brow furrowed as he watched a leaf flicker violently in the wind, held captive in the car's windowpane. He looked like her, but less nervous; he didn't have permanent wrinkles where his brow furrowed. He knew pain, but he didn't understand it, and didn't let it fester. She looked away from her son, eyes on the road where they should have been.

The route to school wasn't long, only twenty-five minutes down residential streets, dotted with cream-coloured homes and one dry cleaner she refused to visit after an unfortunate dealing; they'd stained the blouse she'd worn on her honeymoon, the one with lace-trimmed sleeves. She thought about that blouse as they drove past the small business, the way the cool satin had felt on her once round chest, so different from the clothes she wore now, maternal and unflattering. She itched at the neckline of her shirt with one hand still gripping the steering wheel. She had never considered herself to be maternal.

She had never really intended on becoming a mother, until her husband took her for a long drive in the car and told her there would be no other mother like her, and no other father like him, and their child would be like no other child. She was transfixed by it all. Her entire life she had felt like a minnow in a large school of fish, absentmindedly swimming with

The Detour

the crowd and impossible to differentiate. With him she could finally stop and let everyone else pass her by, swim another way. She let him sink his hook into her, and eventually her son was born.

She glanced at her son, now five years old, in the backseat. He had closed his eyes and leaned his head back in rest. She decided that music would calm her thoughts and reached for the dial to turn on the radio. She pulled her hand back before the dial ever turned. Her son was sleeping peacefully. She sighed in discontent; she would have to go without it.

They came to a stop at a red light that the car in front of them had already passed through. Her view had opened to the intersection ahead. A woman entered the scene pushing a stroller almost certainly containing a baby, or perhaps a small dog. Straining against the seatbelt slightly, the mother leaned forward towards the windshield and determined it was a baby, its tiny feet dangled out of the carriage. Looking through the windshield at the scene that lay before her, the mother felt as if she were a patron, the world was a zoo, and the woman and her baby part of an exhibit.

She watched as the woman fussed with her purse, glanced up at the crossing signal, found it still green, glanced back down at her baby, and relaxed her stride over the harsh white hashes that marked the crossing. From behind the windshield, the mother urged this woman to move forward quickly. She imagined the truck to her left revving its engine the moment the light turned, swallowing the baby under the wheels. Just the thought made her heartbeat quicken, she began to feel dizzy. She glanced at her son in the backseat, still sleeping, entirely oblivious to the impending peril, and turned her eyes back to the road. The woman was nearing the other side of the crosswalk just as the traffic light turned green. The truck in the lane beside hers inched forward into the woman's path, and without a second thought, the mother slammed her hand on the car horn, making the woman with the baby jump, nearly launching the stroller onto the sidewalk ledge. The woman gave her a dirty look as the mother's SUV rolled past her, through the light, along with the steady stream of traffic. The mother was mortified.

'Mommy?'

She had woken her sleeping son; may as well have turned on the radio. 'Just a slip of the hand, honey,' she chirped. Her voice cracked as she

The Detour

spoke. There were two more traffic lights ahead, but one left turn would take her down a secluded, single-lane road: the detour. Hardly anyone else took that road at such an early hour, her husband had shown it to her. Once the moment arrived, she turned left with a thoughtful jerking of the wheel. They would both be safer on that road. She turned on the radio. A light stream of music played, and she tucked some hair behind her ear, settled into her seat, and imagined reaching their destination.

When her son was born, she and her husband looked at a couple of schools in the area, but eventually decided on the one twenty-five minutes away. It wasn't the best school, nor the cheapest, but it sat on a beautiful patch of land framed by towering elm trees. Still round in the belly but cradling her infant son in her arms, she and her husband had driven out to the school and marvelled at the elms on the horizon.

Only one or two homes sat along the road, neither with a remarkable façade, although the mother eagerly awaited one whose yard was entirely overgrown and filled with bluebells. She never saw anyone go in or out, never saw a child playing in that lawn. It didn't appear suitable for children, she thought, with the thorny weeds that crowded the bluebells. She liked to imagine herself living in that home, but her son never entered such daydreams.

Her own yard was cut low to the ground and weedless like the neighbours' houses that surrounded it. Her husband had picked the home, had acted as a kind of notary, giving it his child-rearing stamp of approval, and had done all the talking with the realtor. Sometimes she would wonder to herself whether her cream-coloured home had always looked like every other house in the neighbourhood, or if they had all built theirs to resemble hers, painted them uniformly, trimmed their lawns low to ward off rabbits.

'Mommy?' Her son interrupted her thoughts, peering at her in the rear-view mirror.

'Yes?' She kept her eyes on the road ahead.

'What is that?' He pointed with a sticky finger past her, ahead of the SUV and towards something brown that lay along the side of the road.

'I think that's a beaver, honey.' She spoke while slowing the car so as not to run it over.

'It isn't moving.' Her son pushed his palms into the seat, tried to raise

himself up to look out the window across from him as they passed the pitiful creature.

‘No,’ his mother started, ‘it isn’t.’

‘Why isn’t it moving?’ He sat back down in his seat, trying to crane his neck to catch one more glimpse of the body but his mother had sped the car up from a creeping crawl to a steady roll. The car’s exhaust fumes would swallow the body whole.

‘Well, it’s roadkill,’ the mother strained to speak. She realized that the house with the overgrown lawn and all its bluebells was behind her. Her son had made her miss it.

‘What’s a roadkill?’ Her son put a hand on the back of her seat and strained against his seatbelt to get closer to her.

She turned off the radio. She could hear his breath just behind her.

‘Please,’ she said calmly, ‘sit back in your seat, honey. It isn’t safe.’

He let go of her chair and readjusted himself in his seat. In the rear-view mirror she caught a glimpse of his face. He stared back at her, waiting patiently for a response to his question. It felt like she was driving miles ahead of him. For a moment, she considered going faster, pressing her foot carelessly onto the gas, unafraid of what end she might meet, until she remembered that she was a mother, and she couldn’t leave her son behind.

‘It’s an animal,’ she began, ‘that died in the road. It was probably hit by a car, perhaps one like ours.’

At that her son was silent. She was thankful. In the distance, she saw the elms. They were so close to the school; she could already see herself waving goodbye to her son as the glass double doors swallowed him. She imagined the school as a living being, digesting her son whole, and when the closing bell rang and the double doors swung open, they’d belch, no leftovers. Her hands loosened on the steering wheel. Her knuckles gained colour again. She didn’t remember ever tightening her grip.

‘Was Daddy roadkill?’

Had she been a different woman, or a different mother, she might have reacted in a myriad of different ways. In her shock at her son’s question, she might have swerved off the road and hit a tree, killing them both. She also may have answered his question calmly but with that parental tone, the dishonest one, the one people use with children. She did neither,

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since she was a different kind of woman, a different kind of mother. She answered him as she answered herself when terrible tiny thoughts crept in.

‘In a way,’ she said to her son, ‘yes, he was.’

When her husband died a few months ago, she wasn’t sure what to do with her son, the one she hadn’t originally wanted. She had dreams where she would swaddle him in a round of bubble wrap, all the while he would protest, waving his tiny fists and attempting to kick her with little feet covered in mismatched socks. Struggling to breathe, he would beg for her to stop as the wrapping rose to his face, but she would keep going, pulling plastic all the way from his feet to his head, until he was just a translucent figure she could barely make out beneath the layers. It was to keep him safe, she would say in the dream, but she would never apologise. Every time her son suffocated to death, and then she woke up. She was thankful it ended there; she had no idea what happened next.

‘Did they leave him in the road?’ he asked. ‘Like the beaver?’

Just before the roadway opened towards the school’s parking lot, there was a patch of dirt beside the road, intended for vehicles to turn around. The branches of the trees overhead swayed in the breeze and shaded the pull-off. Dapples of sun broke through the tree cover and illuminated the ground. Ever so carefully, the mother and her son hugged the curve of the road with their SUV until they came to a stop under the shade.

‘No, honey, they didn’t leave Daddy on the road.’ She spoke in the same tone she would use had they been discussing whether her son could have five more minutes at the playground. ‘They picked him up and brought him to the funeral, remember?’

When her husband died, his body had hit the windshield of the oncoming car, completely shattered it, she heard. She hadn’t been surprised, her husband was a big man, with muscular legs like sturdy elms. The day he died she was made to take her son out of school early. She’d had to take the detour, since the main roadway was closed.

‘Why?’ Her son, who’d seldom done wrong in his short life, asked simply.

‘Why did we have a funeral? I told you, remember, when someone dies

—

‘No,’ her son said, ‘why did Daddy have to be roadkill?’

The Detour

Her husband had been doing something that she had asked him not to do when the car had hit him. It wasn't as if he were cheating or gambling – no – he was off to buy her a birthday cake from the local bakery, one she hadn't wanted. He only walked because she had needed to take the car to work that day.

Before she met her husband, her birthday had been no occasion. Her mother had chalked it up to her father's rotating beer collection that filled the single shelf in the fridge.

'There just isn't room for a cake in there,' her mother had said. She had always been confused by this, as she didn't like cake at all, not even as a child.

She and her husband dated for an indiscriminate period before they wed, she could hardly remember how long it was, but sometime during their courtship he'd noticed, on her birthday she went without cake. Each year following, she found herself shovelling bites of vanilla, chocolate, or red velvet into her mouth, chewing and swallowing with terrible effort her least favourite dessert while he'd assure her, she could have the last slice.

That morning he'd insisted on going to pick up a cake, it was her birthday after all, though colleagues rang his portable phone, the bathroom faucet leaked, bills slid slyly into their mailbox, life tugged and pulled from every angle, he still insisted on going. She'd asked him not to as she waved him off, watched him move down the sidewalk before she took off for work.

'It was an accident, honey.' She held back tears, though they were not the tears of a widow, but of a woman mourning the loss of her own life. 'You know he'd want to be here.' The mother told her son. She wished that her husband was there instead of her. She looked past her son, out the car's rear window, and imagined herself stepping out of the SUV and entering the home surrounded by overgrown bluebells, leaving her son, her life, behind.

She glanced at the clock radio; school was already in session. She hadn't realized they'd sat for so long. She glanced in the rear-view mirror at her son, the child she created for her husband who was no longer around. His eyes were swollen, it was clear he had been crying. She felt guilty for not noticing.

Her son: the only remaining piece of her husband, the man who'd made all her decisions for her, and what to do with him? She could finish what

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she started and drop him off at school. She could turn around, but she had to go to work. She could skip work, face the ire of her boss, offer to work two holiday shifts to make up for it, and then what? Who would watch her son? He wouldn't just disappear. He was still in the car with her. She'd made her bed a long time ago, it was time she lay in it.

'What would you like to do today?' she asked. 'We're already too late for school.'

He sniffled and wiped a runny nose, considered his options but didn't speak.

'Maybe some ice cream?' she prodded.

'Maybe some cake?' he asked.

She turned back towards the steering wheel, switched on the indicator, and carefully studied her side mirrors before turning out of the pull-off.

They were headed back the way they'd come when her son called out, 'Look mommy!' He pressed himself against the window, 'Say goodbye to the beaver! Bye mister beaver!'

The mother said nothing but slowed the SUV as they passed the bloodied creature so as not to run it over. She did, however, bid goodbye under her breath to the childless home with the lawn full of bluebells as they passed it.

SID JOHNSON

Extract: From the Deep

It was New Year's morning at Low Glost and I was hanging bad. My head throbbed like a clouted ballbag, and I was sure that something small and rotten had crawled up and burst inside my mouth. I shook my head. Big mistake. Nausea sloshed around my skull, sinking deep into my temples. I kept it up after that.

Lou pulled me along the potholed road, into Low Glost proper. He was getting old, that dog. His flat black coat had grown patchy and whitish, and one of his hind legs was worryingly stiff.

The sun was yet to appear, but there was a pale blue glow to the sky. The air was harsh and briny, and I was glad for my worsted coat. Foolishly, I'd forgotten my gloves, and my fingers ached as I held Lou's lead.

We reached the village green just after eight, a squared-off patch of unkempt grass, its edges bordered by a tarmac track. Three sides of the green were lined with roughcast cottages, whitewashed rows of lime and gravel. The open side led down to Imbel Bay, a stretch of grey sand that curved around from Low Glost out to the remains of Clanoch Castle.

We stopped outside the newsagents, the only one for miles. The lights were on, but the door was locked, and the sign said CLOSED. I groaned. It was supposed to be OPEN. I pressed my face against the frosted glass: a shadowy creature was shuffling about inside. I knocked, gave a little wave. No response.

I stepped back, stamping my feet to stave off the chill. I blew into cupped hands, air curling between numb fingers.

Despite his age, Lou didn't seem much bothered by the cold. Mind, he wasn't the only one getting on. Turning the wing mirror of a rusted scooter, I brushed off the dew. Christ, I looked a fright. And it wasn't just the bruising rings of poor sleep, the facial puffiness of heavy drinking, or my scraggy beard. No, the truth was that I looked old. Permanently etched

Extract: From the Deep

lines were starting to join up, my teeth were dull and coffee-stained, and my hairline was receding like the spring tide. It was disgusting to see; I was thirty-six, not sixty. I had no right to look and feel this bad.

Don't overthink, I told myself. It was a new year, and I could be new, too. I could paint my hair, bleach my teeth, massage the crow's feet, and plaster over the cracks in my forehead. The other business would work itself out – Dave had told me so himself, and I could trust Dave, that trumped-up costermonger, with his breeze block banter and galumphing mockney patois. But until then I had to remain steadfast, like a rock in the raging sea. I could do that, I could –

Oh, hell. I spewed on the tarmac, soft, sloppy chunks that stank like sin. Lou whined, pulling on the lead. I scuffed the mess, tried to make it blend in, but all I succeeded in doing was getting sick on my boot. In an effort to clean the soiled shoe, I scraped it against the green, inadvertently smearing vomit along its midsole. I gave up.

Finally, a dark claw turned the sign in the newsagent's door. I gave the proprietor – Lesil, her name was – a minute to get herself settled, tying Lou up to a lone fencepost before heading inside.

The dinging bell announced my entrance. 'Morning,' I said to the desiccated crone behind the counter.

Lesil sniffed, mumbling something that might have once been considered a greeting. With her crumpled, sexless shape, she looked rather like a salted slug. I circled around to the humming fridge and grabbed the cheapest can of iced coffee I could find, along with a couple of breakfast bars.

I paid in cash; Lesil counted out my change with great deliberation, as though her fading life depended on getting these numbers exactly right. Eventually, she dropped four dull coins into my open palm. I pocketed the money and was about to shoot off when she asked, 'You got somewhere to be?'

'No,' I said. What did she care? 'Why?'

'Seemed in a rush was all.'

'Oh, my dog's waiting.'

'How's that woman of yours, eh?'

'You're talking about Emma?'

'That's her name, is it not?'

Extract: From the Deep

‘Yes, yes – I just didn’t know the two of you were so familiar.’

‘Well, it weren’t you doing the shopping last time you two were here.’ She grinned toothlessly.

I ignored her puerile remark. ‘Yeah, she’s doing okay, thanks. Couldn’t make it, though – under the weather, unfortunately.’

‘Been fair round here, it has, till last night of course; terrible winds, they were.’

I hadn’t heard any wind, and was about to tell her so when the bell dinged again. A slatty rake of a man slunk into the newsagents, and though I was sure that I’d never met him before, I swore I saw recognition flicker in his shallow-set eyes. Then the look was gone and so was he, into the fluorescent depths.

At once, I felt unbearably conscious of my body, of the space I occupied and the air I drew, in, then out. Without another word to Lesil, I grabbed my things and fled.

Out on the green I chewed and slurped. I felt a little better after eating, or I was at least able to convince myself that I did. I binned my rubbish, then went over to Lou. Kneeling down, I scratched a spot under his chin, ruffling his thinning withers. Then I offered him the last bit of my second bar, which he gobbled up gratefully.

I held the fence post as I stood, burping out bile. Lou looked at me with rheumy displeasure.

‘Sorry,’ I said, standing straighter, untying his lead. It was time for our New Year’s walk. Out to Clanoch, onwards to Ballywick, back in time for tea. A good tradition, something to hold on to.

We made our way to the open side of the green, reaching the slipway just as the sun was cresting the horizon. I shielded my eyes as we picked our way down onto ashen sand.

The tide was out, far enough that I couldn’t see where sand met sea. And there it was, jutting up from the distant headland, light breaking on its ruptured walls. Clanoch Castle, or what was left of it: a couple of towers, a crumbling keep, colossal stacks of man-moved stone, slashed and cracked, battered by countless gales but standing regardless. I smiled. Even after all these years, the sight was a pleasure.

The lead went taut. I turned to Lou, then to where he looked. My mind went blank, my mouth dry. Lou looked up at me, eyes wet, tongue loose.

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'Good boy,' I said.

Something lay at the centre of the bay. It was at least forty yards long, around eight high, with a mess of tentacles spilling from its vast bulk. Clumps of people were gathered around it, small and null.

At first, I thought it must be some colossal manner of squid. I could picture it thrust against the broadside of a sailing ship, its tentacles wrapped around the hull and rigging, crushing the vessel and dooming her hapless crew.

Except as we got closer, I could see that the thing wasn't like that at all; its tentacular strands were more chitinous, like the legs of a gargantuan spider crab, but as twisted and tangled as brittle old rope. These crustaceous tendrils drew up to a fleshy, mottled trunk, pocked with limpets and barnacles and wreathed in rotting seaweed. Then there was its head – a stupendous spud sack of a head, weirdly pearlescent in the morning light.

I let Lou off the lead; he'd been tugging for a while, and I felt cruel keeping him bound. I watched him canter ahead, his gammy leg looping. He circled the thing, barking and wheezing and eventually lying flat on the sand, exhausted but still alert.

By then, I was near enough to smell it: fishy, it was. I was reminded of a coastal market come closing time, how they smell after the ice that keeps things fresh has melted into murky, brackish slush.

Most of the folk around the thing were New Year's trippers like me. There were shiny galoshes and freshly waxed jackets, lambswool hats and cashmere scarves. One man poked the thing with a driftwood spike. Another paced back and forth with his phone held high, searching for service. Couples young and old stood back from the thing, pointing, shaking, scratching heads, blowing noses. Kids squealed and giggled and threw sand at one another, blithely accepting of the thing in their midst. I noticed an attractive young woman with small features and unblemished skin. She might have been about twenty-two. Her eyes caught mine. I smiled. She did not.

I looked back at the thing, and my knees went weak. For I noticed then what I had not before: its pearly dome was entirely encrusted with lidless eyes. Some were as small as a fish's, others more like a cow's, or a whale's, or far beyond what had been possibility. A few were closed tight, but most stared blankly, jaundiced and bloodshot, distractingly humanlike in their

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aspect.

There was more to the thing, too, much more than I could rightly describe. It seemed at once like many different creatures lashed together, a foul enmeshment – such a limp account was the best I could muster from close up. Then again, I'd felt dissatisfied from far off too; neither view gave me the clarity I desired. I tried to meld the two images in my mind, but what came out was shadowy and unfocused.

My stomach knotted and turned. I needed the thing as settled in my head as it was in the bay. I decided to study it more closely; at least then I'd have a stable picture, something to base my understanding on.

I started with the eyes. I'd always thought you could get to know someone pretty well by the way they looked at you. It was different when they were dead, sure, not to mention nonhuman, but I didn't have a better idea, and so the eyes had it. That was my first mistake – well, maybe not my first.

I made my way around to the Thing's head, passing onlookers and their uninformed musings. They spoke of government dealings, of ironworks pollution and abandoned telly production. None of their notions resonated. I needed my own, which would come with the right eye. But what was I looking for? One that was like a human's, preferably, and that wasn't wonked out or cockeyed.

It wasn't until I came around to the very top of the Thing's laid-out head that I found it. There, nestled between a fist-sized orb and a colony of tiny peepers that looked more like boils than useful organs, was a good, brown eye – good in terms of size, anyway, for it was otherwise sallow and glassy.

I looked at it hard, if such a thing can be done. Finding it difficult to focus two eyes on just one, I winked my left eye shut. I stood there for some time, holding the Thing's attention. The pupil of this particular eye looked like a splotch of oil dripped into a stagnant pond.

I thought to look away, but I didn't, because there was something wriggling around in the eye, like a maggot or grub, but smaller, much smaller, too small to properly discern. And yet I could see quite clearly how its movement sent ripples across the surface of the sclera. The worm has turned, I thought. Who, me? A worm, a sucker of life and filth, taking my comfort in holes warm and wet? That sounded about right. Soft and

damp, like that patch of mould on the apartment ceiling.

'Nice digs,' I joked. The intern asked if I wanted a toke, and there I was, looking at myself, at her, at what came next. My suit was grey and her top was strapless. It was as though I was truly there, watching silently, an invisible voyeur. Did I regret it? Any of it? I couldn't honestly say. I'm sure she did.

I blinked, and I was back where I had been, looking at the eye, though I was closer now, close enough to see how a filmy layer coated the thing, like the slime of a captured trout. I wanted to turn and run, but the dead eye glinted, and I was once more transfixed.

I was with Em this time, in my own body. We'd just had sex, a routine rut. It had been months since I'd enjoyed it. The lights were dimmed and the air was thick with sweat and ill feeling. I could feel Em's cloying hands, her hot breath, the expensive bedsheets. I looked at her and she looked at me. Before I could say anything, a waft of stale jism curdled up my nostrils.

I made to crack open a window, but Em was upon me once more, like a limbering scarecrow. 'Just give me a minute,' I said.

'Oh, right.' She unhitched herself and slipped away to the bog. Still in bed, I closed my eyes and sunk below, down into the abyssal deep, darkness enclosed by crustose patterns of light, a yawning pit from which nothing could escape.

There I was, plumbing the depths. Against nothing I groped, until my wandering hands at last found their way into a cold, ribbed passage, a canal fit for me and me alone. I writhed along it, and the walls became warm and slick and tight. I couldn't breathe, but for breath I had no need, not until I saw the light: an excoriating pinprick, white-hot, burning, purifying. Providence. Salvation. I gasped, and my mouth was filled with –

'You alright, pal?' an old voice asked.

I jerked back from the Thing with utter self-disgust. I'd been suckling on its brown eye for how long I don't know. I spat and cursed; I raked my tongue and wiped my face, half of which was now lathered with the Thing's goo. It was bitterly sour, with the sticky consistency of clotted snot. To my horror, I was hard as a nail. I shoved my hands in my pockets and stole a glance at the man who'd questioned me, a hoary geezer with juglike ears. 'Fine, thanks,' I said.

Extract: From the Deep

His knuckled face looked as perplexed as any I'd seen. 'What in God's name you do that fer?'

It was a good question, one for which I had no answer. I stammered something like, 'I'm sorry, I have to go.'

I turned to discover that a crowd had gathered: a dozen or so people shocked into silence, their expressions ranging from open disgust to sheer disbelief. A good few of them had their phones out.

The old man laughed, a smoker's rattle. 'Get fair sick sticking yer tongue about like that!' he said. There were no other chuckles.

A gangly teen and his squat companion stared at me like I'd just exposed myself.

'Nonce!' a small boy shouted, half-hidden behind his mother's lipidemic leg. She didn't bother to shush him. Oh well, it was just a word. They can't hurt you – except in writing, blown up for everyone to see in a court of law.

I walked through the crowd; they parted before me, as though whatever I had was catching.

'Give us a smile,' gloated a hirsute ogre.

'Disgusting,' hissed a decrepit shrew.

As I went, I called for Lou without checking to see where he'd got to. Soon he was by my side. I let him roam. We were going back anyway. The thought of keeping on to Clanoch repulsed me.

MANCI WU

Moss

I went to see the psychic again. She didn't look older.

'Do you remember me?' I asked.

'How can't I remember you?' she said.

'Really? So, you know who I am?'

'I remember you. You are one of thousands of people whose destinies I have read. But I only know who you were. I do not know who you are now.'

The last time I went to see her was my first tarot reading. She was a middle-aged woman with a benevolent smile and a prominent nose that seemed desperate to leap from her face, wearing a scarlet bohemian dress that went down to the ground and a dark grey scarf. She put three piles of tarot cards on the table in front of me and let me choose one. I pointed carelessly. I didn't want to choose any.

She told me that my mother's illness would be fine and that I was going to marry a widowed man. He would be a good man, wealthy, intelligent, and, of course, much older than me. I wanted to kneel down and pray that she was right about my mother, though I disliked her prophecy about my marriage. The love that owns me must be pure, I thought. I was too proud to be loved as some sort of replacement, and at that time, I had a boyfriend my own age.

'I got married, but not with the man you said,' I told her with a kind of pride.

'Well, of course, the outcome may change,' she replied.

She was right. I didn't tell her my mother had died of cancer, even in an elegant way, before chemotherapy stole all her hair.

'I'm in love,' I told the psychic.

'Yes, of course. You must be. You have a happy family, a good marriage, and a lovely child.'

‘That’s not what I mean,’ I said. ‘I’m in love with a plant.’
‘A plant?’ She looked up at me. The hollows of her large eyes behind thick glasses made me chilly. ‘It must be someone, not a plant.’
‘I’m serious. I’m in love with a plant.’
‘What is it?’
‘Moss.’
‘How can you know that?’
‘I can’t resist getting close to it, watching it, and touching it – first with my hand, then my face, then my whole body. It makes me feel intimate.’
‘It must be someone, not a plant,’ she murmured. Then she looked at the clock on the wall. ‘Time’s up. We have already had fifteen minutes.’
‘But you haven’t read tarot cards for me.’
‘Yes, but it has been fifteen minutes.’
‘I know. I will pay for it. How much is it?’
‘Ninety.’
‘I remember it was sixty last time.’
‘But everything has changed. Everything can change, you know.’

I had a perfect marriage, woven with affection, admiration, and a five-year-old son, my little elf. I was still uncertain about what owned me in the end – was it the vague love of my husband or his ability to love and to be loved in his fifties? But when he came to see me in the hospital, I escaped from the ward soaked in the salty misery of my mother’s weeping and kissed him with an enthusiasm that shocked me and made him shy. It wasn’t that I hadn’t noticed his wedding ring and his less-than-shiny hair. I didn’t mind being in love with a married man. I could love any man if I wanted to – an elderly man, a madman, a patient – and I didn’t feel like I had played any unique role in his seemingly not-so-miserable divorce.

We got married when I was twenty-two, two months after my mother died. In those ancient stories I had been told as a child, it was unfilial for a son or a daughter to get married in the first three years after their parent’s death, and God was sure to punish such profanity. But who cared about God? God disappointed me. ‘Life is too short,’ so murmured my mother like a curse after her diagnosis. And wasn’t her premature death a warning for me to live as fully as I could, and live it as soon as possible?

Every Saturday, I accompanied my little elf to the botanical garden,

where he stopped every so often to touch here and there: the tree rings on the cross-section of a tree trunk – perhaps once an ailing tree – cut off and severed as a bench; the spiral patterns on a transparent snail shell; the corpse of a poor earthworm who hadn't had time to find its way back, dried up in the scorching sun; and moss.

The first time we had sex, on the leather sofa in his dressing room, my husband lay on my breasts, gasping, stroking my wet hair, tucking it behind my ears. He told me that I felt like moss. I blushed. I thought he meant that I had forgotten to shave.

Only one day after our marriage, he mentioned moss at the dinner table. That day at work he'd been interviewing a famous botanist. As a news anchor my husband was the most considerate person I'd ever seen, humble, sensitive about any prejudice lurking in his perspectives, and had gained a reputation not because of his own opinions but because of the indispensable role he played as a mediator between his guests, those who had distinct but inviolable insights regarding economics, politics, and the origin of the species. Sometimes, watching his guests, who were mostly men, their mouths opening and closing on the TV screen, I imagined the way they zipped and unzipped their trousers – could they reach orgasm simply by discussing public policy?

'You know, the moss carpet, it's about covering,' said my husband. 'The first time I saw you, in the interview, I could see that you had this ability to let others get truly close. That's why I chose you – it's the gift of an excellent journalist.'

I didn't know the point of his compliment. I was no longer in a professional miniskirt, admiring him, understanding him, editing his TV show while letting his hand caress my thighs.

'So, moss has no roots,' the young guide in the botanical garden paused with a cough, embarrassed by his obvious hangover. I'd thought about flirting with him if the unpalatable smell from his sweat-soaked t-shirt hadn't kept me away.

'Native Americans who live in cold environments are experts at using moss,' he continued. 'They use it to wipe the slime off salmon or stuff it into gloves, shoes, even baby beds, in order to keep warm. They apply it to wounds to stop bleeding and put it inside pillows to promote good sleep.'

Moss is small, simple, and plain, yet it supports the functions of the forests with its vast coverage. In truth, the best way to get close to moss is not by watching but touching.'

'Mama, I found my Alice!' My little elf ran to me, hand in hand with a girl, her skin pink as silk.

'Your Alice?' I asked.

'Not Alice in Wonderland, she is my Alice!' He turned to Alice. 'Do you know my mama's favourite plant?'

The little girl shook her head.

'It's moss,' my little elf said proudly.

'Eww, moss!' said Alice. 'Don't you think it looks like green snot? I don't wanna play with a slug!'

'Alice! Don't talk like that!' said the man behind Alice.

It was Lin. I hadn't seen him since we broke up. He was the kind of man I would inevitably have a crush on, the kind of man who made love while reciting poetry. He wore a black leather jacket with a wrinkled pink linen t-shirt underneath. In my not-so-rich collection of the creatures of men, a man who wore pink was always dangerous.

'This is my niece,' he said. 'My sister is pregnant.'

'That's nice,' I said.

'How about lunch?' he asked.

'Hooray!' My little elf made the choice for me.

We chose the family-friendly restaurant at the entrance of the botanical garden. The two little elves gobbled down their pizza slices impatiently before dashing off to the playground inside the restaurant, hand in greasy hand. My little elf had no appetite these days because of his loose front tooth. Every morning when I woke him up, the first thing he did was put his finger in his mouth, touch that suspicious place, and sigh. I didn't know what this meant. Was it a sign of relief that his tooth was still intact, or disappointment that there was nothing new coming into his life? I wondered if I had the right to know what he was thinking. Did I know that of myself?

'How's everything going?' Lin asked. 'Much closer to the Pulitzer?'

'Don't be ridiculous,' I said. 'You know, the censorship ...'

'Well, I did tell you. This is why I chose to stay at university.'

'I remember it was because you wanted to stay with college girls.'

‘Don’t be kidding. But nothing is better than that, isn’t it?’

‘So, much closer to your fantasy now?’

‘Well, I will finish my PhD next year. Then I’ll get a postdoctoral position, then do some teaching, maybe,’ he said, avoiding my gaze. ‘Honestly, I haven’t watched your famous husband’s TV show for a long time. What is truth? Nothing. Nothing but shit.’

‘Nothing but shit,’ I repeated.

He looked at me with strange curiosity, as if I were not the one who had been sleeping with him since our first year of undergraduate, sharing evil humour whilst ordering a footlong sub, ‘No onions, please. And more cheese. And some slices of penis – sorry, I mean pickles.’

My little elf came back crying, tears streaming down his cheeks. ‘Mama, my tooth fell out!’

‘Don’t cry, little one. When did it happen?’ I asked.

‘I don’t know, Mama. We were just running around the slide, and someone bumped into me. His elbow hit my mouth.’

‘Does it hurt a lot?’ I asked, trying to soothe him.

‘Yeah, it does, and I – I can’t find my tooth. I don’t know where it is.’

Alice ran over. ‘Are you crying? My mother said boys couldn’t cry like girls, and that girls shouldn’t cry either.’ She dragged him back to the playground.

A twinge of loss sprawled inside me. A tooth is just a tooth, I told myself. Nothing more. Had I lost something? But my mother was gone, and no one else would remind me that *you don’t know what you’re losing until it’s gone*.

Lin was still looking at me. I glanced at the children. They were being well taken care of by the staff in funny uniforms. Or they weren’t, but I didn’t want to care. A little kid sitting in the baby chair at the table next to ours was crying hysterically, and I felt an overwhelming impulse to stuff her mouth with a thick white napkin.

I stood up, walked to the other side of the table, and grabbed Lin’s arm.

I wanted to escape from this noisy children’s world, from a lie disguised as paradise.

We walked in perfect unison. Outside a large dog, about the same height as my son if it stood up, lay on the wet grass tied to a silk tree, its light brown hair glistening, tongue hanging loose, a pink blossom resting

on its fur. This was the kind of life that once awaited me: a dog, a career I loved, and a man my age with a mind like a boy, reminding me that except for all the flawless TV shows I made, this was life.

The ageless, trunk-like cacti in the desert area made me feel dehydrated. We could walk faster. We could run. Why couldn't I run away from all this? Growing up, it was always me who made my choices – the best schools, the magnificent dresses, the basketball-playing boys my peers swooned over, but who I despised ... since when had I lost all the options?

When we finally came to the rainforest zone, it was the most beautiful time of the day in the botanical garden, atomized mist spraying out from the sprinklers. A girl was complaining to a boy about the photos he had taken of her. A photographer was adjusting his camera, a groom with a beer belly about to burst through his white shirt, and a bride in a fishtail wedding gown, the hem of her dress sunk in wet soil. Messy beauty. These were the kind of lives I'd always been obsessed with.

Deep in the forest, Lin pulled me onto a slippery rock covered with moss. I took his hand, helping him lift my dress. He was skinny, and I felt hurt by protrusions like little beasts sleeping beneath his skin. It was a body with too many marks, and I couldn't find where my memory lay. A desolate distance sprawled between us, making me feel chilly.

I frowned. I wanted everything to stop. But I knew that sort of look on his face – when someone was determined to do something without asking for permission. I knew it very well.

I sighed, looking over his head at the sky. It was a kind of pleasure, at least.

The sky was obscured by a thick collage of leaves, and I couldn't see anything but dense green. But there was more: a fawn drinking from a stream; a venomous snake winding around a tree, making love with the tree; a digital recorder falling down my husband's leather sofa in his dressing room; a condom stained with blood, lost at the bottom of a wastepaper basket; something milky and sticky on a page of a news release I had been writing all night, and which my husband never read ...

Lin was gone.

I took off my dress and lay naked on the rock. The feathery touch of the moss at first made me itch, then dissolve. I stuck my finger between my thighs, deeper and deeper, reaching into a cave of my own, a hole leading

to blankness.

My body was held by moss. I felt like a child, embraced by clouds.

‘Can we visit the botanical garden next Saturday, Mama?’ my little elf asked on our way home.

‘Of course, my dear,’ I said. ‘Don’t we go there every week?’

‘I mean, will I see Alice again?’

‘Of course, you will. If you want to see her, and she wants to see you, you will meet again.’

‘But my tooth fell out. She might think I’m ugly.’ His voice was trembling. I could tell he was about to cry.

‘A new tooth will grow, stabler than the one you lost, and it will be with you forever.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Of course. As long as you eat well and sleep well, your new tooth will grow quickly, and Alice will like playing with you.’

Home was just a twenty-minute walk from the botanical garden. My little elf, who was usually talkative and restless to escape my grasp, held my hand tightly and did not speak. The two of us walked in the evening breeze of early summer amidst the exhausting buzz of cicadas, choking silently on our thoughts. For a moment, I felt that nothing made me happier than the present. It was like I was playing a game with the narrative of my own timeline, and if I didn’t take the initiative, time would trick me instead.

‘How was your day?’ my husband asked as he opened the door, arms wide.

‘Daddy, my tooth fell out!’ My little elf opened his mouth.

‘You know when I was a child,’ said my husband to our little elf, ‘My grandmother told me that if your upper tooth fell out, you should throw it under the bed, and if your bottom tooth fell out, you should throw it onto the roof.’

‘It’s a bottom tooth, but I can’t find it. And we don’t have a roof. We live on the fifth floor.’

‘Well, we live in a city,’ my husband continued, ‘When I was your age, I lived in the countryside.’

‘What does the countryside look like, Daddy?’ asked our little elf.

‘It’s different from here,’ he answered. ‘Too many differences. You know, the forest, the trees, the cry of the boar, the ducks in the ponds. Oh, and moss, moss covering the wall.’

‘I’m in love, Daddy,’ our little elf said, circling his father’s knees.

My husband patted our little elf’s shoulder. His arm stretched towards me, and I leaned towards him. It reminded me of when I was nineteen, the day my mother brought home her diagnosis paper – that was when the disorder of my life began. My mother, my father, and I, the three of us held together tightly, so that we couldn’t tell whose crying it was.

And just like my little elf, I too was looking forward to visiting the botanical garden next Saturday.

POETRY

TAIRA DESHPANDE

Five Poems

1. This Sunday Morning,

I watch you from the kitchen window, digging in, reaching for the good earth, summer-baked in suspended animation, knee-deep in love.

The kids are asking for Daddy, the dog needs to pee, and the coffee has dribbled its last drops into the pot – sediment settling like dust on the windowsill, an hourglass sifting time – but I know better than to drag you into this day of taunting clocks and tired errands.

Hunched over your little purple delights, bent at the knees, busy bee, your whistles carry Dylan into the wind. In the pluck and sow of earth-song, you weed out your worries, unburdened by the weight of what-ifs and should-haves, digging down, down, deeper.

The pressure cooker lets out a sharp whistle, the kitchen window, veiled in fog, keeps you from me. I erase urgent circles into the glass, its surface tense with hope, but you've dug yourself a deep, muddy hole, and the kids are asking for Daddy again, and I am running out of ways to call you dead.

2. Nighthawks

After Edward Hopper's 'Nighthawks' (1942)

You, with your legs too
fatigued to spill
your way back home and
into sleep, you
endure the spare hours of

this night. After
dark, it is a task to look a
stranger in the
eye. The uneven rhythm
of sips and sighs

secures you in place –
a new way to read
time in a city that has learned
to live without the
odd scratches of footfall

on rain-soaked
tarmac. Far beyond, the city's
pastel glows, a lone
comet tears through the
sky; barely a wink

in your lifetime. You
are nothing to
the stars until you grow
into them – a
whispered aside, a misfire.

3. Roots

My fingers circle the clogged
drain, pulling out chunks of today's leftover
lunch. I plunge my hands into greasy
galaxies of oil and soap, scraping
and licking at traces of coffee grounds
and dried yolk, noxious vinegar-dressed
salad greens, pungent spice-infused
curries. I come up for air as bits of bone
picked and sucked clean float to the top
like the remnants of an acid-bathed body.

If I squint my eyes to a narrow degree
I can wander back to the marshes –
noodling for catfish with Ma. Heads down in
the hypoxic murky greens, we would reach
for a ripple in its depths as the weeds
tickled our fingers. We'd make a day
out of it – the sun drying our clothes
salty and stiff on our backs as our prize
lay off to one side, grinning wide.

I do as I'm told now. Mop in hand,
armed and ready, I make the necessary
arrangements to surgically remove a
stain. Disciplined in *yes sir yes ma'am*
yesyesyes I will I am ... words cleansed off
me until I'm all theirs; in mind, in
manner. Hunched over in an unsteady
squat, I follow their mud-lined boots from
doorway to hall to carpeted floor, hunched
over in an unsteady squat, picking slurs
off the ground before they stick.

Five Poems

If I drop the act, settle to the ground
and cross one leg over the other, I could
feel Ma's calloused palms kneading
through my hair, unravelling knots with
the trained hands of a sailor. *This will make
your roots strong*, she'd say, working
the oils into my saturated scalp. I could feel her
arms tire, her stories of childhood misdeeds
and adult misgivings slurring us both to sleep
as the long day slumped to a quiet close.

4. A great big swirling confusing thing

She rusts in-patient, passing time with her library of prescriptions – morning-afternoon-night; every hour on the hour. Swimming in doses of blue and white, she dives in for my name but comes up empty-headed. What's in a name, anyway? She calls me Morphine; she calls me Pain. On the fringes of life, one breath short of goodbye and thirty pounds smaller, mother takes her leave.

A flash of mother – cheeks rosed red; eyes lined black – in her prime: that which can only be divided by itself; that which leaves no remainder. I mark her absence where her weight printed crinkles into fresh-pressed sheets, littering pillows in strands of ombre and premature greys. I soak in the waters where I washed her tendered arms, where I traced her bruised veins in resignation.

You tongue-tied album of post and pre-mother photos – her laughs stuck in motion, the picture of health; me, throwing light kicks in her belly; us, snowed into our tent, blizzard-blind amidst the lofty Himalayan ranges. You, captured perfectly in hindsight.

You, a cross-eyed warping of tidy love, a breath full stopped in sleep, your pools of grief lifetimes-deep, a thief of vocabulary, a pathetic lump in my throat. You weightless burden.

I made every bargain, and yet, you swept mother off her feet; relieved her dry eyes of sight, her sore mouth of song, until alone, I stir in her remains, forever under your spell – you great big swirling confusing thing.

5. Hide and Seek

The thing about Death is that
it hasn't smelled her yet –
she cleans the trail of soot
marking the hardwood
floors. Black fumes disperse
into crevices and cracks
with the determination of an
artist sparkling split
ceramic with powdered gold.

The thing about Death is that
it hasn't heard her yet –
she smothers any song left
in her, inviting the quiet
that arrives with sleep. The
blue scarf she tethered to
the roof surrenders in a quick
rip, masked by sleepless
crows, hoarse from the long day.

The thing about Death is that
it hasn't seen her yet –
she turns on the gas, lighting
a slow flame to keep the
cold at arm's length, but the
winter reels in an early
night, catching strays in its
greedy arms. Count to ten,
and she will come out and play.

NON-FICTION

EMMY McCARTHY

Raw Talent

Act 2 Scene 1 - Enter Marianne

The day I met Marianne was not a nice day. It was shortly before Christmas, the day of our end of term interviews during which each acting student, one by one, was shuffled into a room and forced to sit opposite our instructors, who themselves were positioned Last Supper style on the other side of a table. End-of-term interviews were also where a sad group of three or four students were informed that they were being placed on probation – something akin to a death sentence in our conservatory program, and one that could only be appealed through an exceptional performance in the second semester. I was confident that I'd be on the receiving end of such a sentence. My classmates were all scattered around the hallway outside the studio where the interviews were being held; many were chatting and laughing together. Meanwhile, I was on the verge of bringing up the three bites of toast I'd managed to eat for breakfast. Desmond, a classmate who I was not particularly fond of, was scheduled to go before me. He came out of the studio looking energised and refreshed and everything that I hadn't been in months. "They said to send you in," he said to me.

Then, in an act of emotional self-harm, I asked, 'How was it?'

He beamed. 'Honestly, it was such a confidence boost.'

'Well,' I said flatly. 'I don't think that'll be my experience.'

He looked uncomfortable at that. Guilty, even. It made me feel better, seeing the smile drop from his face. We were halfway through the year and I'd become bitter and spiteful. It certainly didn't help my precarious position, but it served as something of an emotional balm.

My instructors from the first semester were all there; Jen, Irene, Pippa, and at the end of the table, a woman I'd never met before. She was probably in her sixties, with silver hair, thick-framed glasses, and a diamond stud in

her nose. I didn't know it at the time, but I was meeting for the first time the woman whose scene study class would eventually take a starring role in my Vietnam-style flashbacks.

I was put on probation, naturally. I was too quiet, they declared, too placating, I didn't assert myself, and they just didn't know if I wanted to be there. The feedback tended to focus less on my acting abilities and more on the undesirable aspects of my personality.

When the siege was over, I slunk off into the bathroom to cry. I didn't know, when I locked myself in the stall, that my instructors had scheduled a five-minute break between their meeting with me and their next meeting and that the long morning had left many of them with full bladders.

'Emily?' It was Pippa's voice, softly ringing out from the bathroom door. I was locked in the furthest stall with absolutely no intention of coming out.

'Yeah?'

'Is it okay if we come in?'

It was almost admirable, the lack of thought that they put into the whole interaction. This wasn't even the only bathroom in the building.

'That's fine,' I said, placating as always. It occurred to me, as I listened to their footsteps echo on the tile, that this might have been a test. Maybe this was them giving me the chance to assert myself, to speak out and deny entrance to the bathroom. Oh well. The closest I could come to asserting myself was staying put and only allowing them access to two of the three stalls.

I could hear Pippa and Jen pattering around the sink. I tried to stay silent as I waited for them to leave. The door opened again. Were they going? No, someone else had joined the gathering.

'Marianne,' Pippa said instantly, a note of panic in her voice. 'Just so you know, this is not a *private space*.' I wished Pippa hadn't said that. I'd have liked to know what Marianne wanted to say about me.

Marianne was not an easy woman to deal with. She took pride in her cruelty – saw it as artistic intensity.

'I had a former student reach out to me recently,' she told us once, early in the second semester. We sat, cramped, in mismatched chairs pulled from classrooms and prop closets. She stood before us, larger than life,

the woman who was supposed to make our dreams come true. ‘This was a student who’d been cut from the program. She reached out and invited me for coffee.’

I tried not to wince at the premise. I was at the beginning of my probationary period; I didn’t want to hear about someone who’d gone down the road I could see quickly unfurling ahead of me.

Marianne continued, oblivious to my growing unease, oblivious to anyone that wasn’t her. ‘This student wanted to confront me about that year. She leaned across the table, saying, ‘You condemned me, you picked me out to be cut early on and never gave me a chance. You belittled and humiliated me every day in those classes. You were a bully.’ Marianne eyed us intently, giving her words a chance to wash over us.

I felt a bit sick, hearing my own experience spoken so plainly.

‘And I said,’ Marianne paused, clinging to the final dregs of her story, ‘I take that as a compliment.’

She often told stories of former students that she clearly saw as evidence of her impressive teaching prowess, but which I could only really hear as admissions of abuse.

‘I had a student break down in tears a few years ago. She couldn’t get her entrance right. Every time she came through the doors, there was something off, so I’d tell her to go back out, and come in again. Over and over, we did this, and we kept going, even when she was crying. And then she got it, in the end, and it was magical.’ Or, ‘Sometimes I just have to say what the audience is going to be thinking, so I told this one student, ‘We all know you’re a slut!’” The stories tended to be about female students.

With Marianne, I got the sense that she was always just waiting for the chance to talk about herself, and I, unfortunately, seemed to have a talent for prompting her. Marianne’s class took place in the evenings. It was supposed to be from 5 pm to 8 pm, but it tended to go longer, especially on Fridays, when we’d typically be made to stay until 10 pm. At the end of each Friday class, she’d go around the room and make all twenty-five of us say something we’d learned in her class that week. Everyone had to say something original, and you couldn’t say you learned nothing. I would do my very best to say something innocuous, something good enough that she believed I was learning, but not substantial enough that she could grasp onto my words and bring us all along on a ten-minute

tangent when it was already pitch black outside and the dining hall in my accommodation was closed.

‘I’ve learned how important it is to take risks,’ I said one week, thinking she’d like that. She did. She liked it far too much.

‘Oh yes.’ Excitement flickered in her eyes as she stood up straighter. ‘And that can be hard. You find it incredibly difficult, don’t you?’

I said yes, though I didn’t particularly agree. I just wanted to get out of that horrible basement studio that the first-year students were forced to pile into three times a week. My answer didn’t matter, though. She’d already latched on.

‘The good news is that you don’t have to do it. You don’t have to be an actor at all, you could be a marine biologist.’

I probably couldn’t have been a marine biologist. I was never any good at science in school.

‘I,’ she declared, finally broaching her favourite subject, ‘was going to be a lawyer.’

It was a stretch. She didn’t take the LSAT, go to law school, or take any kind of undergraduate prerequisites. She never explained, actually, how it was that ‘lawyer’ fit into her hypothetical other life, rather, she quickly pivoted to the first steps toward a lifetime on the stage.

‘When I auditioned for drama school, I was terrible. I had no idea what I was doing. I just got on the stage and screeched out some monologues.’ She went on to explain that despite a lack of experience, despite apparently bombing this audition, she was accepted.

‘In my final year, a classmate and I decided to break into the admin office to see what the instructors had written on our audition sheets,’ she said. ‘We looked at all of them. Most were covered in notes, talking about strengths and weaknesses and different kinds of potential, and then we got to mine, and there were only two words, underlined.’ She watched us all, making sure her words were being appropriately absorbed, and then she moved to her finale. ‘Raw. Talent.’

My classmates fawned and Marianne moved on to ask the person next to me what he’d learned that week. I sunk lower into my horrible wooden chair, wondering what any of that had to do with me and my apparent inability to take risks and having no idea whether or not I should start applying for marine biology programs.

Act 2 Scene 2

The idea of Marianne's class was that we would spend the semester rehearsing, in small groups, a scene from a play and then those scenes would be performed for the department. She chose the scenes, cast the roles, and oversaw a great number of the rehearsals. We'd rehearse outside of class and then once a week we'd have an in-class rehearsal, during which we'd perform the scene as it stood in front of the class and Marianne and then receive feedback, critique, and direction.

Marianne assigned me the role of Tanya in a scene from a Simon Stephens play called *Punk Rock*. This was not a surprise. In fact, I knew from the first read through of the script that I'd be made to play Tanya. See, on several occasions throughout the play, including in the scene that would be worked on for class, the character Tanya is referred to as 'Fat Tanya.' A US size 12, I was easily the fattest girl in the class.

So fine, I was Fat Tanya. It wasn't great for my self-esteem, but what was? It was during our first rehearsal as a group outside of class that another issue emerged:

Ciaron, one of my co-stars in the *Punk Rock* scene, looked at me over the top of his script. 'I think that when we rehearse outside of class, I'll just pretend to spit on you, I won't actually do it.'

'Sounds good,' I said, following my lifelong philosophy of 'Agree first, think critically later'. When I did, eventually, think critically, I realised that in my rush to be agreeable, I'd overlooked the unspoken declaration Ciaron had actually been making. He wouldn't spit on me in private rehearsals, okay, great, but if that was something that needed to be specified ...

During our scene, Ciaron's character – belligerent English teen called Bennet – becomes increasingly antagonistic to his classmates, played by us, his actual classmates. At one point, Tanya (Fat Tanya, if you're nasty) tries to stand up to him, and he retaliates by spitting in her face. Up to that point in my life, believe it or not, nobody had ever spat on me, so I wasn't sure what to expect. During our last private rehearsal before we'd be performing the scene for our class for the first time, Ciaron raised an important point. 'I should probably do the spit for real, today, so that you're not caught off guard when we do it in class.'

Fair enough Ciaron, I thought. I'd hate to be caught off guard in front

of an audience; better to do it here, alone in a basement studio. I didn't want him to do it at all, ever, but Ciaron clearly saw it as a given. I could've said something. I probably should have said something. Only, Ciaron wasn't on probation; I was. Ciaron was beloved by teachers and classmates alike; he clearly knew better than me how to succeed in this environment, so wouldn't it be best to follow his lead? Besides, if I said, 'Actually, I'd prefer you didn't spit on my face,' would that be interpreted as, 'Actually, I don't want to be here?' My whole existence had become about proving those words wrong. Here, I thought, standing still and stoic as Ciaron prepared the missile behind his lips, would someone who doesn't want to be here do this?

One thing about the spit was that it always got a great reaction. No matter how many times they saw it, our classmates always gasped when it landed on my face. That was good; that was all that mattered. Those gasps signified a good performance, and a good performance meant I'd get to stay.

It all went wrong in a private rehearsal, which meant that I didn't even get to enjoy those gasps. Everything had been going fine, and we geared up for our final run-through of the day. We were scheduled to perform our scene, once again, in front of the class on Wednesday. It was only Sunday, but it was our last private rehearsal before our performance. It had become routine for us to do the spit during our last rehearsal before an in-class presentation – a kind of salivary full dress if you will – and so it wasn't unexpected, I knew my face would be getting wet before I got to go home that evening. When the time came, I said my lines and clenched every organ in my body, preparing for that cold, oozy, odorous substance on my cheek.

When HP Lovecraft wrote the line, 'The Thing cannot be described,' he was referring to the eldritch horror Cthulhu, and yet, he managed to capture precisely the way I feel about what happened in that Sunday rehearsal. The abject horror of that day can never be properly expounded, but still, I'll give it a shot. The Thing, in this case, is Ciaron's poor aim; or maybe The Thing is Ciaron's spit; or, worse still, The Thing could be my left eye. When the spit landed on my cheek, it was disgusting. When it landed in my eye, it was otherworldly. What had previously been a reasonably sized collection of droplets turned into a voluminous wellspring that even

the most industrious dam builders couldn't hope to contain. I closed my eye too late and succeeded only in blocking off the offending saliva's sole point of exit. I felt nauseous; I felt dizzy; I felt certain I'd live the rest of my life half-blind. I should have said something like, 'So sorry everyone, but I'm afraid that one of my eyes is out of commission, and as I've only got the two of them, I'm going to need to put a pin in this rehearsal while I attempt to salvage what I can of my vision, and, in the process, probably vomit because it really is incredibly revolting, thanks so much for your understanding.' But I didn't. I think I was in shock.

I kept going with the scene. Luckily, I didn't actually have very many lines or really much at all to do other than the odd bit of standing there and taking it, so I was able to use the sleeve of my sweatshirt, discreetly, to scrub at my bare eyeball. I wish I hadn't worn white, because the combination of mascara and bodily fluids are the perfect recipe for an impenetrable stain, but I wasn't thinking about that in the moment.

Of course, when I wound up with bacterial conjunctivitis a few days later and had to tell Marianne that, unfortunately, I'd need Ciaron to stop spitting in my face during our scene, she declared the whole incident to be my own fault. She said – in front of the entire class, as was her way – that it was wrong of me to put myself in harm's way, and that despite what she was sure was a lengthy conversation during which Ciaron and I worked out the logistics of the action (she didn't leave me any room to correct this assumption) that I never should have allowed him to do such a thing.

This was worse than the conjunctivitis. Worse than the feeling of my cornea marinating in Ciaron's germ-ridden saliva. Worse, even, than the twenty dollars (plus tax) I'd had to spend on antibiotic eye drops. This was the great indescribable Thing: the monstrous size of my shame, the massive scale of my incompetence, my ever-growing awareness that I'd never do anything right.

NOVEL EXTRACTS

BETH BROWN

Vodka and Orange

Synopsis: *Vodka and Orange* is a novel about girlhood, intense friendships, and growing up before being ready to.

1. NOW

I arrive purposefully late. My hope is that there's a policy and the receptionist will give me an apologetic headshake and point at the clock. I want her to tell me, 'I'm so sorry, but there's nothing I can do.' In return, I want to seem irked but accepting, maybe throw in an exasperated shrug, and then leave without reorganising. The acrid sloshing in my stomach surges into a burp that I hide behind my teeth. The taste in my mouth is a wet mix of last night's spag-bol, vienetta, and cheap vodka; I feel the mince climbing the rungs of my throat like a ladder and have to swallow.

'Not a problem.' The receptionist's smile is too warm. 'Julie will still be able to squeeze you in, don't worry.'

This is the first reason I decide to hate Julie: she doesn't have a policy; she is happy to see her patients no matter how late they arrive to their introductory meetings. The second reason I decide to hate Julie is her apparent catchphrase. She's had it made into three separate signs, just in the clinic's waiting room, 'Turning negatives into positives every day!'

I stare at one of the signs, faded by the sunlight punching its way through the clouds and bouncing off the obnoxious purple lettering. The sign's laminated plastic has come away from the paper and is fluttering at one corner. It takes all my strength to sit still, and not wander over there and peel that little piece of fucking plastic from the wall like loose skin from a nail bed.

There's a magazine on the table next to me: TAKE A BREAK.

'Like I have a choice,' I mutter under my breath.

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I flip it over. There's an advert covering the entire back page of the magazine, some shit brand promoting their equally shit orthopaedic shoes. They've chosen a model who is far too young to be wearing said shoes in an obvious attempt to pretend that they aren't just for the elderly and uncool. The model is the spit-image of Jake.

The twist of my stomach is so sudden that I gasp, the dinner remnants in my stomach surging violently. It's the model's smile, it has the same crookedness as Jake's. I force myself to breathe. I look as closely as I can manage: their eyes are different; the model's don't hold the same cruel glint that Jake's so often did. The model is older too, in his early twenties probably; and Jake will never be older than eighteen. I try and fail, for the millionth time in the past three months, not to think about Jake's face, how it would have looked when they eventually pulled him out of the river. The images vary; some days he's shrivelled all over, skin wrinkly and white, like he's spent too long in the bath. I imagine him sopping and heavy, like a wet towel. Today, when I close my eyes, I see him bloated and swollen, too full, his skin turgid. I imagine popping him with a pin, letting dirty river water leak out of him like a colander.

'Piper Moore?' A woman calls my name from a door that has opened.

I assume that she is Julie; she looks like a Julie. I take a moment to inspect my therapist. Her jet-black hair is bobbed like a helmet at her chin and doesn't move as she walks. She's wearing red-rimmed glasses that shrink her eyes back into their sockets, and a baby-pink power-suit that digs into her flesh at random points and unexpectedly balloons at others.

'I'm Julie; you must be Piper.'

I'm led down a winding corridor of beige. Julie's patent black heels leave little bullet holes in the vacuumed carpet. Her office door is open; one chair and a sofa, fragments of a matching set, are placed at angles. I notice that the windows are too thin and too high to climb out of. The door shuts behind me.

Julie gestures for me to sit. The taste of mince rises up my throat again.

'The traffic was awful. Sorry for being late.'

'I'm just glad you made it.' Julie pours us each a glass of water. 'So, would you like to tell me a little about why you're here?'

I shake the lingering image of Jake's waterlogged face out of my head. I

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won't talk about him, or Porky. I'm not going to mention Stevie, or Astrid. It's probably best not to mention the binge drinking, or the drugs, or the nights that fester somewhere in the combination of the two.

'It just seemed like the thing to do.'

Somehow, Julie manages to make eye contact with me, despite the angle of the chairs. I can feel my hands starting to sweat.

'The thing to do?'

I try to sound casual. 'Yeah. It's the thing to do when you're a bit down, isn't it? Therapy?'

'Yes. It can be.' Julie's gaze flicks to the tote-bag by my feet. Inside is a book I bought to read but haven't yet started, and a now-empty bottle of wine I took from the cupboard yesterday, wrapped in a scarf.

'Can you tell me why you're feeling ... a bit down?'

I look for something to stare at instead of Julie. Mounted on the wall, amongst the magnolia and eggshell, is a little green plastic house. The small doors above the clock face are shut. I try to picture the mechanical bird I assume will peer out on the hour, every hour. Every second, a tiny tap clicks out; the bird's beak on the doors, asking to be let out. I imagine its little beak, tentative: tap, tap, please, tap. I wonder if it ever gets tired.

Julie is watching me. 'Was it your idea to come to therapy, Piper?'

'My mum thought it might be good for me.'

Julie tilts her head and I feel myself cracking a little, like an egg.

'Because I've had to take a leave of absence from uni. I'm sure she told you that on the phone?'

'Do you want to talk about what led to that decision?'

'It wasn't much of a decision. I was only there a month.' I laugh once and rub my sleeves over my eyes a few times. 'I wasn't ... sleeping well, that's all.'

I'm still not sleeping well, I want to add, before stopping myself. I'm not doing anything well. I need Julie to tell Mum and Dad that I'm okay so that they can stop feeling bad for me and leave me to rot in peace.

'Are you sleeping better now that you're home?'

I hum some vaguely positive response and look up to the windows.

'And when did the insomnia start? When you left for university?'

I shake my head. 'I've never been a great sleeper, but it's gotten worse since August.'

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Julie leans forward. 'What happened in August?'

'I think my parents are being dramatic, really. I'm okay. I just need a bit of time, and then I'll go back, and everything will be fine. My leave of absence is only until the end of January, it's not that long.'

Julie tilts her head again; her bob remains unmoved. I shift in my seat.

'Plus, it's not like I'm not doing anything. I've got a job. I've started cycling. I'm flying through the reading list for my course, so I'll be ahead when I go back, if you think about it. This is a good thing, really.'

'I agree. I think taking some time off is always a good thing,' Julie says. 'It's okay to take this time to rest, you don't have to be so ... productive.'

I think about all the hours I spend staring at the ceiling from my bed. 'I really value my rest too, don't worry.'

Julie nods and scans the papers on her lap. 'And I see you've signed up for Smile Support?'

My face drops. 'Is that the ...'

'Group therapy?' Julie issues a practiced smile. 'Your mum thought it would good for you. She sounded eager when she spoke to my PA.'

'She thinks I have no friends,' I mumble.

'Why does she think that?'

Because I have no friends, I want to reply. 'My friends aren't at home right now. Stevie is volunteering in Costa Rica saving the turtles and Astrid is at uni in London. She's studying to be a lawyer. I talk to them all the time though.'

'Well, lots of the young people at the practice go to Smile Support. It's on Thursday at 6 pm, I'll email you the address.' Julie checks the time on the cuckoo-clock. 'Okay, I just need you to check over some paperwork.'

I skim the forms lazily and hand them back. 'It all looks fine.'

She taps her finger on the box marked DOB. 'It's your birthday?'

'Uh-huh. Nineteen today.'

'Well, happy birthday! Any plans?' Julie stands and I follow her to the door.

The burst of the cuckoo from its clock-house is so sudden and startling that I freeze mid-step. The bird's beak is open, its body a mess of melting purple scraps of plastic that must have looked like feathers at one point. It shakes in a mechanical quiver, going through the motions of song without producing anything. It looks like it's screaming. The bird is yanked back

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into the plastic house and the doors shut tightly in front of it.

Julie is watching me, watching the cuckoo. She looks sad for just a blink.

I leave my bike propped against the wall. The corner shop is the farthest from my house, the windows have been covered with sheets of graphic-ed plastic, advertising a new low price on margarine. I've perfected my strategy, I have enough shops in the rota to make sure I never have to buy from the same shop more than once every few weeks. It helps avoid any suspicion that I might have a problem. I haven't been to this particular shop in a fortnight.

It's colder inside the shop than outside, the aircon blasting unnecessary bursts of freezing air at the November day. The shop assistant doesn't look up as I walk in, he's reading the back of a sky-blue vape packet. I pretend to be perusing the aisles, as if I don't know what I've come in for. I walk past the fridges and pick up a packet of cocktail sausages that look like they've seen better days. When I come to the right aisle, I read the prices of the pre-mixed cans, the beer, and then the wine. I crouch down to get to the bottom shelf. I opt for whatever is on offer; today it's the rum.

The shop assistant pulls his gaze away from the vape to assess what I have plonked onto the counter in front of him. His lip curls up ever so slightly in judgement.

'These are in the meal deal. Do you want the meal deal?' he asks, pointing at the cocktail sausages.

'No, thanks.'

He scans the rum. 'I'm going to need to see ID. Have you got ID?'

I pull my driver's license from my phone case and hand it over for inspection. His eyes move from my face to the card, and back again.

He's holding the light pink card with both hands and squinting. 'This says it's your birthday. Is it your birthday?'

'Yes. It is.' I hand over a crumpled note, part of the money Aunt Sherry sent in my birthday card.

'You should have cake for your birthday.' The man says, suddenly looking quite sad at the sight of the rum and cocktail sausages. 'Please.'

He steps out from behind the counter, leading me with an open arm to a refrigerated shelf. On it, are a dwindling display of desserts, each one

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sealed in dimpled plastic packaging.

He nods enthusiastically. 'Pick one.'

'I'm fine, honestly. Thank you, though.' I try to back away.

'It's on the house. Everyone should have cake on their birthday.'

The desserts are all comically large. There's a fruit tart that looks like it could feed a family of four, its strawberries and blueberries glazed in thick jelly, sinking slowly into the yellow custard beneath them. The solitary chocolate pie is cracked on top, a crevice opening like a gaping mouth. A banoffee pie is pushed to the back of the shelf, it looks relatively unscathed. I turn back, the assistant is watching me with pity. I want to peel my own skin off as he gives me a thumbs up. I pick the banoffee pie.

'Thanks,' I say as I place it onto the counter.

He nods. 'You're welcome. Happy birthday.'

I get out of the shop as quickly as possible, making a mental note to remove this location from my rotation. I eat the cocktail sausages stood outside the shop, pushing them into my mouth one by one like a coin game at the arcade until the packet is empty. I leave it on the ground.

I wrap the rum in my scarf and put it into my tote bag. The banoffee pie won't fit, its plastic container is too wide. I contemplate leaving it on the floor too, and then I imagine the shop assistant's face when he finds it. I curse under my breath and check that no one is around. The pie is cold and heavy against my stomach as I manoeuvre the container into the waistband of my joggers, adjusting the string to keep it in place. As I climb back onto the bike, the edges of the plastic dig into my thighs, crinkling and snapping loudly as my legs begin to pedal.

I pull the bottle of rum out from my bag and unspool it from the scarf as soon as I'm back in the safety of my bedroom. I pour a hefty splash into the grimy mug on my bedside table; it mixes with dregs of the tea, a murky pale brown tinge clouding over.

My phone starts to buzz rhythmically as Stevie's name flashes on the screen. I finish the mug in three wincing gulps and press the green button, immediately turning my camera off.

'Happy birthday, Pip!' Stevie is pixelated, but even her outline is tanned, blonde, salt-dusted, and grinning. 'Is your camera still broken? I thought you said you were going to get it fixed after freshers?'

Vodka and Orange

I sink into the cushions and watch the staccato image of Stevie's head moving against the blue-skied background. 'I'll do it next week, I promise.'

She walks to a spot where the signal seems decent. 'I won't be annoyed, because it's your birthday, even if I was really excited to see your face.'

'You saw me three months ago. I look exactly the same. I promise.'

'I just miss you,' Stevie's voice cracks a little and I can't tell if it's the signal or emotion, 'I've barely spoken to you since ... how's uni? Tell me everything.'

'It's not that exciting.' It takes all my energy to keep my voice light. 'You're the one on an adventure. How's Costa Rica?'

Maybe I don't say it loud enough, or maybe it's just the Wi-Fi, but Stevie doesn't hear me. She carries on romanticising university through crackles and pops and pauses in the signal between us.

'I can't wait for – how's your flat mates – have posters? – I'll come stay – back in December –'

I stay quiet, content in hearing the snippets of Stevie's voice. I am in my childhood bed and Stevie sounds like home.

'– made friends?' Stevie's face smooths for a moment and I notice the new freckles that have accumulated on the tip of her nose.

'Oh, you know me, loads.'

'You only ever need me and Trid, you know that.' Stevie grins. 'Speaking of which, did she tell you about the guy in her halls with the weird belly button?'

I pour more rum into my mug. 'No, she didn't.'

Stevie is distracted by something out of shot. I can see her nodding to someone. She mouths one minute to whoever is waiting for her. 'Oh really? Well, it's hilarious –'

'Someone's knocking on my door. I think I need to start getting ready.' I tap my knuckles on the bedside table.

'You're going out? That's good.' Stevie stands up. I watch her background shift from wall to sky. Her wave stutters on the screen. 'Okay, well have a great night. I love y-'

The line cuts out and I don't call back to tell her I love her too. I turn my phone off and stare at the banoffee pie. The bike ride home has left the dessert in a bad state, its cream sticking to the lid as I unsheathe it. Most of the topping clings to the plastic, revealing puddles of caramel

Vodka and Orange

and smooth pennies of banana where the whipped cream has peeled off in patches. I don't have a spoon, nor do I have the energy to go and retrieve one from downstairs. I stick my finger directly into the centre, hooking it under the biscuit base and yanking a scoop upwards, into my mouth. I go in again until my hand is full, my palm slathered in the mix of dulce-de-leche, thick cream, and biscuit. A slimy piece of banana is lodged between my knuckles. I push past the vomit that threatens as the rum starts to curdle the cream. When the plastic is licked clean, I push it under my bed with my foot to join the mounting pile of things I can't be fucked to deal with right now.

I take another gulp of rum, lie flat on my back, and stare at the ceiling until my birthday is finally over.

LUCY CAMPBELL

Velvet

Part One

(i)

Roly put his head on a chain saw.

I was at university, a couple of weeks into my first term, when the envelope arrived, unnaturally thin. Not like the usual fat letters which he'd been sending for the past few months after he'd returned home to South London. They'd flop onto the doormat heavy like a fish. He'd been chewing over the aftermath of what had happened in densely written prose on A4 lined paper ripped out of a jumbo refill pad, folded up, crammed in and posted to me, unfiltered.

I'd been receiving them at home for the past few months. This was the first one at university. He didn't have my new address so he'd sent it care of the Warden's Office. It took a number of days to get to me.

Frank's usual crawly small writing was scratchy and urgent; only a few words looped on a page.

*Roly put his head on a chain saw down at the dock on a building site
found his way in through a hole in the fence parted the chicken wire
and stepped through the men were on lunch I heard the news fifth hand
I thought it was the neck he had gone for The truth is more sleepy and quiet.*

I phoned Frank's number from a payphone in the corridor behind the lecture halls. The phone was one of those metal ones with a hood. It rang and rang.

I phoned home. My mother picked up. She told me the news, explained what had happened, which was still unclear.

In my head, even after all this time, I imagine Roly in the vast open space of the dock area, a town's-worth of wide concrete walkways with stacked containers and carry-trucks. No one there, the workmen on lunch, the shriek and whoop of seagulls, tang of briny water, diesel fumes, gusts of breeze brushing inland from the water where silent tankers wait, rusty and barnacled. Light plays off the sea, his sensible-shoed feet are resting in shallow puddles marbled with oily swirls. He is a butterfly on a carefree flight, tricked by the wharves and anchorages on the way to an inescapable confinement of heat and machinery. He picks his way through a chicken-wire fence which has a hole in it, lured to the intimate space of lathes and cutting machines. He switches on a spinning saw and kneels down, rests his forehead on the giddy blade, as if in supplication, offering himself in a strangely gentle act.

I went home. Dad picked me up from the station. He hugged me. I buried my face in the reassuring smell of him: soap and woollen jumpers. He took my rucksack and swung it onto his shoulder.

Let's get you home.

In the car, the short weeks of university were obliterated, and I scrolled back to where my life had been, as if I had never escaped. The worn-out car smell, petrol, saggy leather seats, and year's old cigarette smoke.

Do you know anything else?

No ... such a quiet boy ... unthinkable ... his voice drifted off as he went back to concentrating on driving.

I settled in and watched the familiar town unfold, a place I knew so well. It now felt fictional, like a construction, and more sinister as a result. The hills I had walked up and free-wheeled down, to-ing and fro-ing to school and my friends' houses, roads branching off and curving round in the map of my childhood.

We arrived home. The house seemed smaller, like a dolls house, pokey and claustrophobic.

I slept in my old bed. Everything appeared exactly as it always had, but felt minutely and irretrievably altered.

(ii)

The next day, Frank picked me up in a car. Last time I'd seen him, a few months before, no one had a car. No one could drive.

It's for freedom, he said.

He handled the car like a pro, but sheepish and ashamed.

Don't judge me, he said. *I'm a failed rebel. I know how it looks.*

Why don't you just cut your hair and put on a suit? I'll buy you a briefcase, I said.

He tried to laugh.

We slipped into silence. I could feel Frank turning over words in his head, his mind whizzing and whirring like mine. He'd be thinking of saying something like, *what even is there to say?* Then he'd wonder, *is that a tautology?* The question of the tautology filled my brain for a minute, like a pointless puzzle game.

I wanted to say, *Roly was a fucking dark horse,* or something. I wanted to make Frank cackle with his old derisive glee, to groan over a terrible pun on Roly's head rolling. There was much here to be funny about but we had no appetite for it. It was too sad or bad or uneasy or terrible. We had no real idea.

Then Frank filled in the silence.

Apparently, Roly's head kind of bounced on and off the blade a few times, I suppose you have to be quite determined to keep your own head on a chain saw, so he's not that bad. Well, he is bad, but it's his mind not his actual brain.

I thought about this, and said,

Well, that's good then. An upturn.

At the hospital, Roly had been moved from the surgical unit to the psychiatric wing. We walked along interminable corridors of peeling paint and badly placed signs to find his ward. A nurse in a white uniform said she'd fetch Roland for us.

He finally gets his promotion to Roland, Frank said, after she'd walked off.

We waited in a room with plastic sofas. Men were arranged like stuffed animals. A thin deer was standing at the tea urn, under a sign that said 'Smoking Area'. He was staring at his lifted hand as if it were separate from his body. A bison lay slumped, beside a polar bear with crossed legs

and patchy matted fur. Roly arrived in the room, from the far side. He floated over to us, as if hovering above the ground with no hurry to him, a narrow bird in a pale gown, a blurred outline of his once tangled self. His bristly ginger hair had been shaved off and his head was bandaged like Top Cat after an accident.

We drank coffee and smoked cigarettes, knocking the ash into saucers on the low tables. Nothing was said. He smiled at us, at least in our general direction, but unfocused. The medication deadening him; he must be drugged up, pointless to try to talk to him. We were a world away from reasons. We supposed it was Velvet and what had happened, but that seemed too direct a narrative for such an illogically poetic and violent act. Maybe we would never know. At least we were here.

In the car on the way home, we didn't speak. Frank pulled up outside my house and reached over to pick up a stone from the dashboard. He handed it to me,

A present, he said.

It was grey, a bit knobby, with one long protrusion. Someone had drawn eyes on it, making a face.

It's for you, he said. It's Mr Fuck Nose.

Mr Fuck Nose.

1. A year earlier

It was September already. We were a week into the new term but our bodies believed we were still in overheated summer laziness. It was an effort to drag ourselves into school. We were seventeen, at sixth form college, meant to be taking A-levels, but failing ourselves in one way or another. As Frank said,

We needed new blood, we were sick of ourselves.

There's this new girl hanging around with Eric, someone said. *She's called Velvet. You'll really like her*, which meant that I wouldn't. Eric was my boyfriend, in theory. And the name Velvet sounded made up.

Me, Sam, Jai, and Roly had been hanging out for years. We had all been at primary school together. I suppose I was a tomboy, I preferred hanging around with boys. Roly was a maths brain and Sam and Jai were too, but

pretended not to be. Frank had come to live with Roly's family. He was like a cousin but not actually related. That's what Roly told us when Frank arrived. Frank was the same age as us, and was refusing to go to school in South London where he lived. He kept running away from home. We didn't know what he was running away from. *Nothing apparently*, was what Roly said. But I also heard that Frank's dad had died a few years before and his mum had married again. He had some issue with his stepdad.

It was a Saturday; sunny, heavy and close. My morning had been erased by sleep. I got up and headed out of the house, cycling up the hill and over to Roly's house, straight into the garden, and dumped my bike against the shed. One of the French windows was ajar, and a *Smiths* album was playing on a record player, phrases of melody rolling into the garden like speech bubbles: *Heaven Knows I'm Miserable Now*. I looked in at my friends in the dark interior, a tableau of my people. Sun was streaming in through the window, highlighting the curls of cigarette smoke, languid in the static air, and specks of dust suspended in an endless moment.

Sam was cross-legged on the floor, leaning over his guitar with a roll-up in the corner of his mouth, immersed, head bowed, playing along and singing to himself,

*In my life ... Why do I give valuable time
To people who don't care if I live or die ... ?*

A bar of sunlight outlined his dreadlocks in a halo and singled out each individual hair on his forearm.

Frank was centre stage, draped over his red armchair, smoking, head back, eyes closed.

Eric and Jai were at the back of the room, rummaging through boxes of records, like stage-hands picking out props.

Roly wasn't there, though this was Roly's house.

It didn't help that Roly was unaccountably, helplessly uncool and nothing could assist him out of this. *At least he was clever*, we said, so he had an excuse, and everybody loved him – *he hasn't got a bad bone in his body*, was the kind of thing adults said about him. He never missed school, did his homework on time and looked nerdy in his clothes whatever he wore, with a whiff of elasticated jeans pulled up too high, and sensible shoes.

Velvet

He didn't say a lot, and when he did, his voice was breathy and halting as if out of practice, and, as he said, no one was listening anyway. Someone at school once said that Roly was like a neglected toy lost under a bed or at the back of a cupboard. If Roly went missing, no one would notice.

The new girl, Velvet, was here. I could see her stretched out on the tangle of Frank's unmade bed, eating pistachios, cracking shells with her teeth, eating the nuts and dropping shells onto the sheets.

She had a shaggy mop of dark hair, half-covering her face, and was wearing a red tulle ball gown, presumably from last night. I hadn't been there.

It was rucked up under her legs which were stretched out behind her, bare and firm. She flicked her feet up from time to time, one then the other, randomly, like a tic. The nutshells were rolling under her arms and chest where her weight had formed a hollow. A saucer of ash and fag ends was beside her, and from time to time she gathered a handful of nutshells and dropped them onto the saucer, but any movement knocked them off again.

As if triggered by some instinct she looked up and saw me outside, watching, and something passed across her face, a recognition I suppose. She must have heard about me, as I had about her. She jumped off the bed and bounded over, through the door and outside to meet me, in her bare feet. She was short, compact, with an internal energy and something of the buoyancy of a pony about her, with the thick mane of hair.

The thin strap of her ballgown was falling off her shoulder on one side, exposing her breast almost to the nipple, and she left it as it was, taking my hand into hers, and shaking it in a formal greeting, adding the other hand in a two hander and looking straight into my eyes. Her hands were warm.

Hi, I'm Velvet, as in Underground. You must be Fi. I know all about you, Eric has told me everything.

Eric must already be fucking her.

I am staying here with Frankie, trying to keep him lively, she added.

We had never called him Frankie before.

I saw a burn mark, like lava, as if it had flowed in rivulets down the side of her neck, on the left, below her face almost framing the perfect skin above it. The burn then travelled down onto her chest on the left side,

ridged, dark pink. She had chosen not to hide it.

I wanted to touch it.

She pulled me by the hand into the room, over and onto the bed, gave me a pillow, and shoved another one under her arm and propped herself up on her elbow, agitating her fringe back over her forehead. She shook two cigarettes out of a Camel pack and lighting them both with a match, dropping it, inhaling, and giving me one.

Now ... Fifi. She blew smoke gently at my neck ... Tell me all about yourself. I am very happy to finally meet you.

Surely, she'd only been around a week at the most. I slapped at the match, charring a hole in the sheet.

Her toes stroked my ankle and I laughed. She put her face into the pillow and inhaled,

... mmmm I can smell boy breath. I like the smell of boys they smell of smoke sleep hair-gel in dirty hair naked skin.

The scar was visible on the side of her neck. She could sense me staring at it.

... do you like my burn?

She lay sideways on the pillow, then flipped her pelt of hair over to one side, exposing her neck, and lifted her arm so I could see the burn as it travelled down her left flank,

... you can touch it if you like everyone wants to they don't ask, so I offer get it out the way.

How did it happen? I asked, putting the tips of my fingers onto the top of the scar where it started, on her neck. It was not soft and yielding as I expected, but rigid, like rubber.

I let my hand rest on her skin, mainlining her energy, drawing it into me. I wanted to run my fingers all along the scar down her flank to where it disappeared into her dress.

I turned on my back and inhaled, stretched out, then flipped over again and surveyed the room. Eric caught eyes with me.

Eric had discovered Velvet. I don't remember the details of where exactly he found her. He was always bringing new girls into the group, making a collection. He had an instinct for interesting girls, forever hunting

Velvet

them down. I was still sleeping with him, and was tired of his flirtatious entanglements with other girls. It was bewildering as I had thought I was his girlfriend, but as he said, *possession is bourgeois, we don't own other people*, so I pretended unconcern as he brought in another girl, and then another, into our circle. Every time I felt the sting of shame.

I had been Eric's find a few months before. We met in English class. He was dreaming of post-punk stardom, was in the middle of getting a band together, *Eyeless Bunnies*. He was my first boyfriend, or at least the first boy I'd slept with. I thought I was old to be losing my virginity at seventeen, when it was legal. The whole point was to be underage. He was gawky and tall, with a pigeon chest and huge doe-eyes. He had been at a Catholic boys' school until he joined our sixth form.

I spent endless days in Eric's bedroom having sex in which I felt like a curious outsider as he did things to my body. His bed was stacked up on storage drawers, under low eaves, an Artex-swirled ceiling within touching distance. Eric had written, in black felt-tip,

In the room the women come and go

Talking of Michael Angelo.

I was pretty sure Michelangelo was one word.

When I wanted to discuss life and our relationship, he said, *you think too much*.

Eric was watching me as I lay next to Velvet. I turned away and gave my gaze to Velvet who was contemplating Sam, silhouetted against the window.

I can imagine Sam with four legs and jumping straight up, like a young gazelle.

I could see what she meant, his dreads were short and formed a crown of unfledged antlers, and he had something leggy about him. Bambi.

Hey, Velvet asked, *how do you get your drainpipes so drainy?*

Annie takes them in, on the sewing machine.

Is Annie your mum?

Sam rested the guitar on the floor.

Annie's our sister.

Is "our" a twin thing? Velvet did the inverted commas in the air with her fingers. *You and Jai are so identical.*

Velvet

We are identical, Sam said.

Yeah, but it's more than that isn't it?

Are you asking can we read each other's minds? ... Hey ... Jai ... Sam called over ... *Do you know what I'm thinking if I'm not here?*

Like when you're on the toilet? Or if you're wanking? Jai replied.

Velvet gave a raucous snort.

Exactly. Yeah. That's what I wanted to know.

LIV COLEMAN

Lorna

Synopsis: *Lorna* is a novel about love, religion, and isolation, set in tenements on the west coast of Scotland. It follows the interconnected lives of three residents who are searching for redemption, and the angry ghost that impotently haunts them.

1.

I stand on the top floor and listen for the town. The flats on Fisher's Row are empty. Their threadbare carpets are thick with dust, the patches on the walls left by frames begin to fade to monotonous colour, and there is rust around the plugholes. There are other tenements, bigger, brighter, closer to the sea, that are teeming with life, with incomers that strip the wallpaper and expose the floorboards, but the flats on Fisher's Row are empty. They are too hidden, too wonky, too close to the rough old pubs that still paper their windows. I could have the whole block to myself if I wanted but I stay here on the third floor, as close to the sky as this house will let me. The town hums. The gulls cry. I stay and search for traces of her. Somewhere a child is sobbing, a man is shouting. These are the old noises. Newer, the traffic groaning, the bright music from the garage across the road. There is a party going on in Hall Street, a taller and grander building than empty Fisher's Row, the lights in the back windows burn and figures cast shadows across the communal gardens. I hear it all. I've heard it all. Fisher's Row is condemned, the whispers have reached me up here, and I know these days are numbered. They will pull it down and I will – what? Disperse into the air in a cloud of dust, kicked up with the rubble? Or haunt this patch for whatever comes next, the car park or supermarket or holiday home that will be grafted onto this earth? And if I am freed from this place, what then? Cast loose into the world, will I find her? Or will

I lose what remains - the impressions of her story that are pressed into these walls like markings in clay?

Sometimes when I stand for a long time, when the gulls quiet and the sea breaks through, when the sun is rising or setting, time shifts. Memory, stronger than the weak and fickle present, rakes through me and I am consumed by the hungry past. If this is the end, let me share it with her. Let me follow Lorna one last time. I have moved in my memory so long it is easier to slip into the loving past than to hold focus on this empty present. As easy as mortal children sleep, I fall. Time shifts and I fall sideways, the world rushes through me, and I know I will come back to her. My fitful mind takes detours, I bide my time with the young people who squat here after they are bussed out from Glasgow. I watch them from the corner as they try and fail to find jobs, I watch them fall off into a blissful dream, I watch them slip into the cracks. My hold deteriorates as the paint peels, and I snatch at the memories that will take me to Lorna. And again, and again. The whispers tell me the rest of the town has built up, built back, cruise ships come in from America, I hear their mournful cry, the fishing industry is dead but tourism and whisky and the 'desolate beauty' of the West Highland coast have swooped in. Main Street and Hall Street and Royal Avenue and the Burnside Square thrive and bustle, brave little town fighting against the odds, but Fisher's Row is empty. The squatters will leave soon, right now they doze while the town bubbles up without them. I've grown quite fond of them, yet I snarl in their ears for they keep me from Lorna. I shift again, and again my mind betrays me. I watch the man who thought himself an artist. He brings things home from the beach shore, bones, and gnarled wood. There is one, a bone, that is huge, he has a friend to help him carry it. The centre is like a section of a tree trunk, two long fins coming off the base and another, off the top, spurred and sculptural. He brings a girl home and shows it off to her. She's a local, she tells him it's illegal to keep it. She stays the night anyway, and I move on, finally, roll sideways into the past.

I sit on top of the wardrobe in the bedroom and watch a child weeping. This is the time before the artist, after Lorna, wrong again. I sift and search for the right moments, a place to break back into the story that I have relived more times than my own pitiful pre-death. This is the family with seven children and all seven of them share the bedroom. All these

Lorna

tenement flats are laid out the same. You come off the landing into a lobby with four doors. The bedroom and parlour face out to the street, the kitchenette looks back across the yards. Parlour and kitchenette both contain a bed recess, often guarded by a paisley curtain, often containing an ailing parent or elderly aunt. When the Kellers lived here, the boys had the bedroom, the mother the kitchenette recess, and the father was in the parlour. The most wonderful thing, the truly magical thing about these flats, back then, were the bathrooms, narrow little rooms with toilets and tubs and running water, how they were envied across the town. I was glad when the bathrooms were put in. I liked the baths. Bedroom, parlour, kitchenette, bathroom. Replicated here just four times up and four along, four closes, a neat block on a slight incline, crowded in by better buildings. Mine is the first one, or the last, depending which way you come up the street. The child cries because her siblings have all gone to school and work and she, five years old, is left alone in the flat for the first time whilst her mother is out for messages and her father is out for work.

I roll through time and I think of Lorna, her hair against my cheek as she leans to do the brasses, her knuckles to my lips as she blackens the range. I whisper her story in the ears of the folk I pass, I wail her story up the chimney and let it disperse over town.

(Lorna, I loved you. I know you know it. It was just because I wanted to help you so badly, I wanted to help you, take me take me take me, you wanted to join me. I drop through the floor, and time moves with me; I can feel it rushing. Time, take me to Lorna, take me back to my love, I cannot stand this, I need to hear her words again *take me take me take me*, take me back to Lorna.)

Too far, I fall too far. Time rushes through me and I fall too far. Memory slides like the tide, I land with a bump in front of the boy who will be her husband. I bite him because I can. He will grow up here with his four brothers and his wandering mammy whilst his daddy sits in the Isla down the road and drinks Tennant's behind the blacked-out windows. He will start at the Catholic school where twenty children sit in a hall divided by a curtain and the Protestant children shout through the railings at playtime. He describes each day in great detail to his mammy, who is only half listening. He and two of his brothers will buy a boat, a good little boat, and he'll be a fisherman when Lorna agrees to marry him, on their

wedding day I will weep at her beauty.

I sit in front of this doomed child. His hair is black, his eyes too big for his little face. He has old-man-eyes. His name is Andrew Keller and he will die at thirty. I move to the kitchenette and watch his mammy at the stove. She wanted to be a teacher but she married a drunk, now she cooks all day and takes in mending. Sometimes she leaves the flat, leaves the boys, the oldest is seven. Where does she go? She comes back happy. I think she just walks. There is a hill behind the town, I can just see it from the top window. It is grey-green and purple in the sun. Then a sea haar comes in and eats it up. I hate this flat before Lorna. I drop through the floor, try to remember who else was here then, is here now. On the first floor is the captain who let his crew drown. Archie. It's not so unusual for men to drown here but the town hates him for coming home. He should have stayed at sea, stayed in the Kilbrannan Sound like their husbands and sons did, like the boys upstairs will. He drinks like the fish he should have become. I wouldn't have minded dying at sea, there's more room out there, but then I never would have met my Lorna. The drunk captain is in bed in this time, he sweats onto his sheets and mumbles. There were porpoises in the harbour the day his boat went down. The gulls flew inland. The gulls. That's all I hear even before the birds get rare. At sea there are guillemots and shearwaters and little dark petrels and auks, the captain has seen them all. When I fall back into his life, I caress his cheek, so he remembers what he has lost. What a neat trick. He cries. I blow cold air across his face as he sleeps, and he dreams of storms.

He loves the sea, they all love the sea, it gives them their bountiful harvest. This is now of course, as in back then, the now of memory, the now when the sea captain drinks and Andrew is a child because in the future, the now I come back from, when the youths and artists move in, there will be no fishing anymore, not really, not enough to keep a whole town alive. The artist will talk about it, he will talk about infrastructure and deprivation and big industry. But now in the past, they still see the sea as their great garden of plenty and they understand that sometimes she will take their men. This is a fair exchange. Archie knows he cheated the sea when he came back and the others didn't. He drinks because his survival, seen as miraculous anywhere else, broke an ancient understanding here. The widow of his first mate came around when he was still in bed with

water in his lungs and she told him to fuck off back to the sea and die. I've seen it happen a few times. But now he just lies in his bed and drinks. When he starts to die in earnest (I allow myself to run ahead), I will throw all my energy into this room, anything to drive him away from this place. Old and sick, he will crawl down the hallway and down the stairs. I will scream in his ears and kick and punch; I will not let him stay in this place. Fuck off, there is no place for you here, fuck off back to the sea. He will drag himself down the pavement on his stomach, the townsfolk will say he ran out of booze and was trying to get to the Ilsa for one last drop. He will die in the street, wishing it were the sea. I climb the walls and crouch on the ceiling of the second-floor parlour.

There is something big happening around this time, it seeps under the doorways. I didn't pay attention when it happened before, but when I fall back into it now, I listen to their hushed voices and their wireless' and the planes overhead and the lists of the dead. There is an army base in the moors behind the town so the bombing is more intense here. The town shivers. It tenses with each groan and creak. The Italian family that run the cafes have all been taken to internment camps on the Isle of Man, Andrew's mother tells her sister as they sit peeling potatoes, and doesn't the whole town feel that wee bit safer for it? I don't know the year, I never know the years, they are arbitrary to me, they slip and slide beneath my fingers. All the same, this year is an important one. It tenses and curls like a living thing and even in memory I feel the thickness on the air. On the first floor Archie awaits my caress. The married couple on the second floor, ignorant of the pain around them, hold their love as totem against the bombs. On the third floor the Keller boys squall and gibber.

The married couple on the second floor delight in each other. They spend hours on menial tasks for the joy of their shared company. They will only stay here a year; I've seen it all pan out again and again. They met at a dance at the town hall, one of those where all the farmers' children come in on the bus, she was a farm-girl, grew up near Carradale, they met at the dance at the town hall and he pretended he had lost his key so she would help him look. They love that story, they dwell on it, move around it, pull it out for guests. She misses the farm sometimes and complains about the town, how dirty it is and how busy, how everyone knows everyone's business, and nobody bothers knocking, especially her mother-in-law

who has a key for emergencies and uses it liberally. But if she really meant it, she would leave and she doesn't. He is as gentle as a mourning dove and he promises her that when they have a baby they will look at taking on their own farm, how would that be? She will go out one night when the bombs are falling, to see a friend who is confined back in Carradale. The house in Carradale will collapse around them and the whole family will be killed. I won't see much of him after that. His mammy will take him back, she will come and pack their things away. When she finds the girl's wedding dress, the one they made together after hoarding their coupons, she will sit on the bed and cry, and she won't know that I will be there next to her.

I like the young couple. Their tragedy appeals to me. They are both very beautiful. Not like the artist. Sometimes, when they go to bed, I stay in the room and watch. It passes the time until I can get back to my Lorna.

(Oh Lorna, do not think I betray you. They are nothing, just flesh, just pretty flesh. I would never reach to them as I did, do, will, reach to you.)

The married couple are in bed. They seduce each other slowly, breathe each other's names so quietly. I feel this memory solidify around me, holding me in this pointless, war-torn year, where Lorna roams free and her untouchable presence haunts me. I watch it all unfold again, knowing each second brings Lorna closer to me. The couple on the bed pause, disturbed by the intensity of my need. Lorna. The wind in the harbour echoes her name, the masts whisper it between each clink. I crawl along the bedroom floor and rest my chin on the foot of the bed. I will wait for her, and she will come.

Time rushes. I fall deeper, so deep, I come up gasping in the third-floor lobby. I have found the right memory and now we are here, now we've got it right, oh, I could weep if I still had tears. The war is over. Andrew opens the door with his braces around his hips and a cigarette between his teeth, outraging his poor withering mother. On the other side of the door is Lorna.

REBECCA COXON

Toasted Coconut

2.

Ally retrieved a pack of cherry menthol chewing gum from her pocket and tapped her fingernails against it, moving it around Nora's head as she did so. She tore off the end of the wrapper, placed a tab in her mouth, and knelt so that her lips were in line with Nora's left ear. The tab crunched between her back teeth, making a soft breaking sound, then a swell of saliva engorged it into something more gloopy and wet. Ally winced. She hated chewing sounds herself, but they were popular on her ASMR channel, and she agreed to almost every trigger requested by private clients. Almost every one. There were a few boundaries she wouldn't cross. Violence was one of them; they could go to someone else for that. No doubt there were plenty of sadistic people who did this work, but she was not one of them.

Occasionally she was surprised at some of the requests from prospective clients. Roleplays were negotiable, but not something Ally enjoyed. The most popular was playing nurse, which made sense, though there were differences in taste (and price) ranging from the authentically medical to something kinkier. She had also been an air hostess and, bizarrely, a clarinet teacher. But those scripts took longer to research and write; it was a chore. Once, she pretended to be an elderly man's daughter, even putting on his daughter's clothes, jewellery and perfume. She hated every minute of it. She was pretty sure he got an erection too. It was awful.

Ally leaned in and chewed the gum delicately by Nora's ear. She kept her mouth open and elongated the motions of her tongue. She stared at a portrait on the wall to distract her from the offensive slushy sounds she was making. It was an unusually tall painting, almost life-size, of a family standing outside a house. A man in a red polo shirt and a woman wearing

a striped, green dress were holding a baby, but they were all parrots. Or perhaps they just had parrot heads, Ally couldn't quite tell. She added another piece of gum, then moved over to Nora's other ear and continued chewing, slowly and sloppily.

Nora's breathing was getting deeper now, more content. Ally carefully lifted out a white feather from her rucksack and skimmed it across the ridges of Nora's collarbone. She stroked it up towards her forehead and back down the other side. Her movements were confident and nimble, like a magic trick she'd done a hundred times before. Nora let out an involuntary moan that could have derived from pleasure or pain, perhaps both. It was a good sign; her body and mind were in harmony, accepting what was to come.

Ally reached over and lifted out a small, beaten-up children's book from the shoe box. She wasn't familiar with the book, but she knew Nora had read it religiously as a child. It had helped her learn English, she'd said, and she wanted this story to be the last words she ever heard.

Ally placed the book on her lap and gently lifted open the frail hardback cover. It was an illustrated version, and the green drawing on the front looked like a delicate lino print. She turned the first few pages and noticed some handwriting in pencil. The characters were in a different alphabet, so she could not read what was written, aside from the date: *06.09.1979*. It was yesterday's date. Forty-seven years ago.

'Okay Nora,' Ally whispered. 'I'm going to read your favourite story now.'

'Tarka,' Nora said.

'Yes.' As Ally replied, her stomach gurgled. It was nearly lunchtime. She quickly spoke again to hide the sound. 'You read it a lot as a child, didn't you?'

Nora muttered something that Ally didn't understand. She wasn't sure if Nora had meant to speak out loud or not.

'Okay, let's get going, shall we?' Ally continued.

'It was my favourite book to fall asleep to,' Nora said.

'Perfect,' Ally replied, wanting to hurry up and read it.

'Tarka the Otter,' Ally began. 'His Joyful Water-Life and Death in the Country of the Two Rivers, by Henry Williamson.'

Nora yawned and stretched, wriggling her body deeper into the sofa.

‘Chapter One.’

‘Мне жаль,’ Nora said. ‘I’m sorry.’

‘What are you sorry for?’ Ally replied.

Nora said more words that sounded like they were from another language. ‘Never mind.’

‘Is everything okay?’

‘I’m sorry, I’m trying to switch off my brain, but it’s not so easy. Please continue.’

Ally took in a deep breath. ‘Twilight over meadow and water,’ she whispered. ‘The eve-star shining above the hill, and Old Nog the heron – ‘Ally?’ Nora interrupted.

‘Yes,’ Ally stopped herself from rolling her eyes.

‘Thank you for doing this.’

‘It’s my pleasure,’ Ally smiled. ‘Thank you for trusting me.’

Nora quickly opened her eyes, looked at the glass of water on the table, then shut them again.

‘Are you working for anyone?’ Nora asked with a sharp shift of tone.

Ally’s chest clenched. This was not part of the plan. Just relax, for goodness’ sake.

‘Oh, no. I always work independently,’ Ally replied, no longer whispering. ‘I guess you could say I’m freelance.’

‘So, you aren’t splitting the money with anyone?’

‘No, it’s just me, and everything I do is confidential and discreet,’ Ally replied. ‘There’s no one else involved at all.’ Ally half-smiled. ‘Why do you ask?’

‘Before we actually do it, I just wanted to make sure you weren’t working for them.’ Nora gestured upward with her hand. ‘It’s the kind of bullshit they would try.’

Despite speaking in English now, Ally still couldn’t understand what Nora was saying. ‘Sorry, who’s them?’

Nora sighed and clasped her hands over her forehead. ‘No, don’t worry, it’s okay. You can continue.’

Ally was irked; she wasn’t quite sure what to do. Nora’s outburst was ruining the mood.

‘Does anyone else know I’m here?’ Ally asked.

‘Well, I hope not,’ she replied. ‘But they can be secretive. I shouldn’t be

telling you any of this, but since I'll be gone soon anyway ...' Nora looked off into the distance. 'It just occurred to me ...' She trailed off and paused. 'I just want to make sure they aren't getting their dirty claws all over this as well. I want it to be on my own terms, completely.'

'Nora, who are they?'

'No one. I don't know. I haven't told anyone about you. It's all as you requested,' she insisted. 'Encrypted or whatever, no trace.'

'Okay,' Ally said. 'Well, then no one else knows I'm here. And everything is exactly as we planned.' Ally nodded, hoping it was true.

Nora was just getting confused and paranoid, Ally thought. She could only assume it was part of her illness. Something similar had happened with another client in the past; he'd spoken in intermittent gibberish right at the end as she was massaging him.

Ally noticed that Nora was staring at the glass again. Perhaps she had changed her mind.

'Now I don't want you to worry about this,' Nora sat up and grabbed the glass in her hand. Ally's heart raced. Was she going to drink it or throw it?

'But I'm not actually ill,' Nora continued.

The music changed, leaving a few seconds of silence. A new track began: a monsoon accompanied by a twangy sitar.

'Sorry?' Ally replied, hoping she'd misheard.

'I'm not ill,' Nora repeated.

'What do you mean?' Ally wanted to grab the glass out of her hand.

'I don't have blood cancer.'

'Wait, I don't understand,' Ally paused. 'Hold on, then why are you -'

'I'm in debt,' Nora said.

The room suddenly changed; its lavishness felt heavy, and fake. The shadows from the blinds painted the living room wall in stripes, like bars. The parrot family looked like they were incarcerated. Ally didn't know what to say. How could Nora afford all this if she was in debt?

'Don't worry, it won't affect you. I've made sure of that. And I've already paid you anyway.'

'Okay, Nora, but I only help people who are ill and dying,' Ally said slowly, as if reading from her own marketing leaflet.

'We're all dying,' Nora replied, almost laughing. 'But I know,' she shrugged and muttered something in a different language again.

Ally had detected an accent at their first meeting, but she'd not thought to pry, considering it irrelevant or even rude. When she'd asked Nora where she was from, she had said 'London' and that was that. Now her brain was furiously attempting to place her accent. Somewhere in Eastern Europe or Russia, perhaps? Or Turkey? She hoped it didn't matter; she just needed to grab the glass out of Nora's hand.

'Surely it doesn't make any difference whether I'm sick or not?' Nora continued. 'It's not like you asked to see my medical records or anything.'

'Well,' Ally's head was throbbing, 'I don't ask for that stuff because I don't like to be the judge of what is worth living with and what is worth dying for.'

'Do you kill depressed people?' Nora asked.

Ally faltered. She had clinically depressed people as clients, of course, but it was never the only thing they came to her with, although she realised that she could not be completely sure of anything.

'Of course, but –'

'Well, just treat me like one of those. I don't want to live any longer.' She brought the glass up to her lips.

'Nora!' Ally shouted, then reeled herself back in. 'This is a big decision,' she continued more calmly. 'Are you telling me that you don't have a terminal illness and you want to die because you are depressed?'

Nora looked into Ally's eyes for a few seconds before answering. 'Yes.'

'Right, well –'

'If you were in my position, you would feel the same.'

'But what position are you in, Nora? I don't understand –'

'It's a long story, and ... I don't want to implicate you; it's messy. But essentially,' Nora sighed, 'there are some people who want me dead.'

Ally had no idea if she was telling the truth. For all she knew, Nora was completely delusional. She had come across it before, when she was a social worker. Paranoid schizophrenia. It was sad, and it was impossible to reason with someone like that. Placing yourself at the centre of a Bond-style high-stakes assassination plot was cliché, but pretty classic. The only thing to do was play along.

'But if they're trying to kill you, then why are you paying me to do it?'

'Their way will be terrible, horrific. If I'm going to be in the news anyway, I'd rather it not be my decapitated, charred body,' Nora replied.

‘At least this way, I’ll still look good in the crime scene photos,’ she said, smiling.

Ally panicked. ‘Why will it be in the news?’

Nora chewed her bottom lip and closed her eyes again.

‘It’s a long story. But I had a different life before I moved here. I was married to someone. He was high up in the government, blah blah blah.’ She waved around with her hands as if the full story was too boring to tell. ‘We were abroad, and things were great for years, but then it all changed very quickly.’

Ally’s throat stiffened. ‘Mmhmm.’

‘Anyway, there’s a lot of people who don’t want me here and are trying to get rid of me.’

‘Are there people watching you?’ Ally asked.

‘Yes, but they don’t know I’m here. I promise. I don’t live here.’

‘Then who’s house is this?’

‘It’s rented for a few weeks. I got my assistant to find it. She thinks I’m holed up writing my memoirs or something.’

‘Okay. Nora, I don’t know if we should continue.’ Ally reached over to grab the glass.

‘Please,’ Nora pulled her hand away. ‘Please. I can pay you more.’ Her tone was desperate. ‘I have to go through with this, everything is sorted,’ she pleaded. ‘I shouldn’t have said anything.’

‘But you said you were in debt?’

‘I am, but it’s not the normal kind of debt. I have plenty of money. I’ve actually scheduled another transfer, as a thank you. You’ve been so kind.’ Nora looked into Ally’s eyes. ‘Please, can you stroke my hair again?’

Ally’s chest tightened. She tapped the music off on her phone so she could think more clearly, then started stroking Nora’s hair again. They sat like this, silently, for a while.

‘How do you know they want to kill you?’ Ally eventually asked.

‘Because they already tried,’ Nora replied.

Ally was frantically trying to figure out if this information changed anything. She just wanted to carry on reading the otter story and leave, but she felt like she’d taken a pinger. There was so little time to think. Was it really worth the money? Was it even true?

‘Nora, can you promise me I’m not going to get into trouble for this?’

‘I promise, I’ve gone to great pains to protect you.’ Nora replied. ‘It’s not you they want; it’s me. If anything, you’re doing them a favour. You’re safe, Ally, I promise. I just want to do this my way. Their way will be brutal.’

Nora placed the glass back on the table. Despite her frothing headache, Ally couldn’t ignore the thrill that was shooting through her veins, her belly breaching and falling. It was a flavour of adrenaline she hadn’t felt in years. The kind that she used to feel in the early days but never did anymore. She couldn’t remember the last time she felt like she wasn’t just playing a role. But this was like the jeopardy of an Agatha Christie novel, but it was real. She felt a twinge of empathy for Nora; whether she was delusional or genuinely being targeted, she sensed that she was telling the truth about not being ill. Ally’s belly fizzed at the thought of it.

This was just another client and another job, she reasoned. There were always risks, and there was only so much you could do to mitigate them. It felt hypocritical to deny Nora but help others. And if Nora was telling the truth and this was her only reasonable way out, then that was her decision to make. But people don’t just kill people. What if Nora had done something terribly wrong? Was she a spy? A war criminal? Perhaps even more of a reason to go ahead with it if so. Ally could feel the back of her knees sweating as she stroked Nora’s hair.

‘I’m guessing Nora is not your real name?’

‘No,’ Nora replied. ‘But it does begin with N.’

Ally started massaging Nora’s ears again. Or the woman formerly known as Nora.

Everything would be fine, she thought. She would stick to the plan and avoid the news for a few weeks. Or, maybe she wouldn’t. It might be fun to read along.

‘Okay,’ Ally whispered. ‘Back to your bedtime story.’

Nora’s face beamed, and she closed her eyes again.

‘Thank you, Ally,’ Nora’s voice broke. ‘I’m so glad it’s you, not them.’

Ally ran her fingertips along the pages of the book and quietly cleared her throat.

‘Twilight over meadow and water,’ she whispered. ‘The eve-star shining above the hill, and Old Nog the heron crying kra-a-ark! as his slow wings carried him down to the estuary.’

Nora reached out her hand, and Ally instinctively held it in her own.

The agreement was that Ally would read, and Nora would reach for the glass when she was ready.

‘A whiteness drifting above the sere reeds of the riverside, for the owl had flown from under the middle arch of the stone bridge that once had carried the canal across the river.’

It was fifteen more pages before Nora gestured for the drink. Ally handed it to her and positioned the straw between her lips. Nora sipped as Ally continued reading. The sound of air being sucked so slowly and the liquid glugging down Nora’s throat gave Ally tingles at the base of her neck. The clear liquid was all gone. Ally took the glass back from Nora and placed it on the table. She would be unconscious soon, then Ally could relax.

Ally continued reading the children’s book aloud for twenty more minutes, enough time for the drink to take effect. It was a lovely story, she thought, with lots of trees and streams and birds and bees. After a while, she lifted Nora’s limp wrist and checked her pulse. Nothing. Perfect.

It wasn’t the way she usually did things, but after Nora’s revelation, Ally thought she should probably check what was written in her letter. She picked it up: two sides of A4, handwritten in pencil. One side was written in English, and the other was in a different alphabet. She wanted to skim as fast as possible but forced herself to slow down and ingest every word carefully. This would be the only time she could read it. The next reader would probably be a police officer.

As her eyes followed the words across the page, her chest pounded.

‘Oh fuck,’ she muttered under her breath. She couldn’t believe what she was reading. ‘This is crazy.’

Ally looked at Nora’s lifeless body and felt a vibration within her bones. She was intoxicated, almost panting like a dog. What had she done? She felt more alive than she had in years. She blew out the candle, walked over to the piano, and calmly sat herself down. She started playing Tchaikovsky’s ‘Swan Lake,’ the only Russian piece she knew off by heart. The piano was out of tune, but it didn’t matter. It sounded glorious.

JESSICA DRAPER

The Window People

Synopsis: Anu is grieving. A mourning agoraphobe with a mood disorder, she spends day and night watching people from her fifth-floor apartment window, forming parasocial relationships with the strangers below her. Her loneliness increasing, she grows frustrated at the people's ignorance of her, and tries wild tactics to get them to notice her. Along the way, a series of people are enticed up to her flat. Each one will unearth something unhealed within Anu, and she will be forced to confront her innate inability to connect to other humans.

1.

The window people paced below me, tiny and taunting like gnats. They were ignorant beings. They never looked at me, not once, and they didn't care to know me. They only knew how to walk, like babies, with their heads down and mouths closed.

I was a patient woman, however, and I had no problem in waiting. I imagined them one day waking from their stupor, hit with some penetrating urge to look up and then seeing me and becoming awe-stricken. One by one, they would drop to their knees, applaud, kiss the ground, apologise for ever having ignored me. I, of course, would forgive them, save for one or two because I had to make an example out of someone.

I chose one at random, mouthed *sorry*, and pressed my finger hard against the glass. I pressed until my finger turned white, imagining their skull underneath cracking open and their brain popping out on either side of my fingernail. When I took my finger off the glass, they were fine. Whoever's head it was had kept on walking. Only a greasy fingerprint was left smudged on the glass.

The window was large and spanned the entire height of my little

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apartment, up high on the fifth floor. It was one pane of glass, touching the ceiling and stretching down to the floor. The window didn't open, or else I would have opened it and shouted *hello! I'm here! Won't somebody look at me?* There was no handle or hinge, just a pane of glass where the wall should be. I suppose they didn't want anyone jumping out, in the same way office windows only open an inch or two - enough to let the air in but not enough to fit a body through. I didn't like that they did things like that, that they tried to assert control over my own death. I'm not saying I wanted to kill myself; I didn't, but I would have liked to have had a choice in the matter.

The window that didn't open looked down onto one of Manchester's central quarters. There was a set of traffic lights with a zebra crossing in the middle, the white paint chipped and rubbed away, so only a few of the white stripes remained. A tram stop cut through the middle, with metal track lines running through the tarmac. The roads were always busy, with people running across in front of cars and the trams blowing their horns when they arrived and departed. I could hear it from my apartment, the horns and the shouting, all through the night.

There were too many people for the size of the streets. People pressed up against each other and twisted their shoulders to try and slip through the crowd quickly. I liked to make stories up in my head of where they were going and who they were going to meet. I'd give them names and feelings and sometimes I'd give them trouble. I watched a woman in a white ankle-length dress run across the road and step up onto the pavement. She was called Beatrice, and she had just had a fight with her husband about the co-worker he was having an affair with. The fight turned physical. She had run off to go see an even younger woman who she was also having an affair with.

Shops lined the side of the streets, with office buildings stacked on top. A homeless man named George would sit all day in the entryway of a shuttered shop that closed down a few months ago. He was always there, all through the night too, and I think he was my favourite because he never left for more than an hour or two. There was a large café on the left side of the street, next to a post office, and a big restaurant at the top of the road. The restaurant was my favourite area to watch. The people were dressed all fancily, and they'd either leave in love or pretend to be.

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It was December, so the trees planted on each corner were bare, just brown sticks and thick branches towering over the little people. Sometimes, the ice would harden in patches on the pavement and the crowd would pause, begin side-stepping it, and then one person would slip and all the others would fall down with them, disgruntled and maddening.

Condensation dripped down the glass and I kept wiping it to keep a clear view of the window people. Sometimes, when I would sit there and watch, I liked to think that I was God, bestowing judgement. *You*, shaky old man licking the corners of your newspaper as you walk, *I don't like you; I bet you spit on birds and only eat your grapes cut down the middle*, and *you*, woman with the red lipstick and her little white dog that is pulling on its lead to run into the centre of the road, *I think I am in love with you*.

I had regulars, too. Ones that took the same route each day and had the same weekly routines; church on Sunday, job centre on Monday. Ones I could spot instantly amongst all the others. My favourite was a babysitter of three children. I would sit and wait for her, and whenever she didn't turn up at her regular date and time, I would grow anxious, hoping she hadn't gotten sick, or died, or moved.

She didn't always have all three but often had just the new baby. It would be wrapped in its blanket and kicking its little chubby legs out the bottom. I thought about having sex with her. I thought about going down there, rolling the baby into the tram tracks and taking her down a side street. A small side alley where only Thursday's binmen went. I would undress her and feel the shape of her breasts, and I thought about how they would feel inside my mouth. I wanted to know how hot her skin felt to touch and whether her pubic hair was shaven or grown out or somewhere in between.

I was jealous of the window people. They were seen and touched by so many people on a daily basis. I tried to count it. That woman has been touched by five people today. That man, two. That woman, eight. That man, two hundred and ninety-four. I played it like a game in my head, keeping a tally of the winners and losers. I liked to play it at night when I couldn't sleep. Sometimes, I tried to calculate how long, how many days, how many hours, how many minutes it would take for someone to find my body if I died inside my apartment.

I wished I liked silence like so many people say they do. I wish it relaxed

The Window People

me, gave me time to read or allowed me to meditate, but the only thing it did was cause me to get restless. I could feel the anxiety rising in my throat the longer the silence continued. The apartment was not truly silent; there were plenty of car horns and engine revs to fill the space, but there was no human noise. No breathing, or footsteps, or scrapings of the chair as someone moved around like there used to be. Inside the apartment, I could hear nothing at all, and it terrified me as though nothing and no one existed anymore.

The bedroom in my flat had no window, so I couldn't see the people at all. I would toss and turn all night, unable to sleep, plagued with the thought that I would wake up and look out the window to see empty streets and barren roads. I dragged my blankets into the living room, pushed the sofa up to the glass and made a bed by the window.

One time, when I lay there alone at night, I thought I saw her. She looked just like her, an uncanny double, waiting at the traffic lights, lost and dazed. She was wearing that scarf, red and woollen, pushed up under her chin. Her black hair was thick around her neck, and the cold wind turned her cheeks red. I reached my finger out and put it up against the glass, pressed over her tiny hand. We walked together, my finger tracing after her. Her hand was small, and the skin warm and soft.

The traffic lights changed, and she crossed the road, merging into the crowd of night-time walkers on the other side. For a second, I lost sight of her, but then I caught her again, her rounded white ears shining through her hair. I knocked on the glass, but she did not look up. I leaned forward and kissed her on the cheek. The glass was cold, like a frozen cheek in the winter. Suddenly, it was March of last year again, and she had just left for the last time.

She was running from me, and she looked scared. I stood up and knocked on the window with both hands, then banged with my palms flat on the glass. I was calling out her name, *Mika!* She was still struggling to get through the tight net of bodies, and I tried to keep sight of her, but soon she was swallowed whole by the swarming mass of bodies.

The silence welled around me, a sharp sound like a knife tapping against a drinking glass. My ears ached, the pressure rising, and I thought that my eardrums were going to rupture.

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I took out my phone and called my mother. Whilst it rang, I fiddled with the tags of the sofa cushions and ran my hand under the seams. My fingers felt something, and I pulled it out. There was a receipt for oranges wedged in between them from Marlow's fresh fruit store and a number on the bottom for complaints or feedback. I hung up and dialled in the number at the bottom of the receipt. Customer service hold music began to play, then: *I'm sorry, we're unable to take your call right now. Please call again later.*

I dialled Mika, the ringing tone sounded and I was glad her number had not yet been disconnected. I reach her voicemail again. *Hi, you've reached Mika. Sorry to miss you. Leave me a message and I'll get back to you.*

I hung up before the beep and stared at the keypad. I typed in eleven numbers at random and hit call. After a few tones, a man answered. 'Hello?'

I sat up. 'Hi.'

'Who is this?' The man's voice was rugged, like he had just woken up. I wondered if he slept alone. I wondered if he slept with someone. I wondered if he was naked at the time of calling.

'Who are you?' I asked, wondering what he looked like. I wondered if he was a window person and if I had already seen him before, pacing below me and ignoring me.

'What? You rang me? Who is this?'

'Are you alone?'

There was a silence for a while. I could hear him breathing on the other end of the phone. 'Freak,' he said, then hung up.

2.

I didn't like to leave the window people unsupervised. They were like children, who, if left alone, might touch a live socket or a sharp edge or be kidnapped by a stranger on the street. Through my new sleeping arrangements and the compassionate leave from work, I was always watching.

Each morning, when the reminder would ring to tell me to take my medication, I would try to be quick. I would play a game and time myself to see if I could beat the time from the day before. I got up and headed to the kitchen, it was an open plan apartment, so the kitchen and living

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room were split simply by changes in the flooring. Wood transitioning into linoleum.

I grabbed some water, an orange, a yoghurt, and my medication packet from the top drawer. *Lamotrigine, 300mg, prolonged release*. I settled back into the window seat, the cushions holding a heavy indent of my body. Twelve seconds.

I swallowed the small, rounded tablet and unpeeled the orange. A young woman entered the street from the doors of the post office. She had a soft face and a brown papered parcel tucked under her arm. I pulled apart the fleshy segments of the orange with my teeth and rolled them around on my tongue. She looked back and forth down the street, checking for approaching cars before crossing the road.

I tapped on the glass with my finger. *Hello? I'm up here, can you see me?*

After reaching the other side of the road, she climbed the few steps up to the tram stop. I peeled the lid of the yoghurt cup back and scooped the light pink mixture onto my spoon. Whilst she waited, she rocked back and forth on her heels. I knew her. She had a fetish for men who couldn't speak and had just picked up a new gag at the post office. I tapped again on the window. The yellow tram rounded the corner and stopped in front of her. She stepped on, and the woman was gone.

I threw the spoon at the window. It bounced back and clattered on the floor. The yoghurt stuck to the glass, then slowly slid downwards. I wiped the glass with my sleeve, and it left a murky smear. The window people looked fuzzy and blurry, fogged dots moving back and forth. The people seemed less real without their faces and expressions and bodies. They were fish below deep water, so deep that if you plunged your hand down, you wouldn't be able to touch them and feel their little scales. I was alone in the flat again, and I began to cry.

I poured my glass of water down the window. It splashed onto my bare legs and dripped onto the floor. With the other sleeve, I rubbed the glass, and the haziness wiped away. The window people returned, and I felt my chest loosen.

I was drying my legs when I heard the phone ring. I dug it out of the corner of the sofa and clicked the answer button.

'Your father is an asshole.'

I switched my phone to the other hand and settled back down. 'Good

The Window People

morning, Mum.'

'Seriously, you'll never guess what he just did. He'd been ignoring me all week, all he does is sit and watch that sodding TV. He's getting fat, too, just wait until you see him next. Anyway, I'd decided I'd had enough, so I took the remote and held it up high where he couldn't reach it. He's always hated the fact I'm taller than him, and I always say to him, 'Maybe if you stopped eating so much shite you'd grow a little.' So guess what he did? He went into the garden and pissed on my flowers. All of them! Even the blue hydrangeas, they were finally sprouting. I could hear the phone ringing inside at this point and that's why I didn't answer, darling. And you know what I said to him? I said to him, 'That'll be our Anu on the phone. Wait till she hears what you've done now.'

Outside the window, a woman was walking with far too many layers on, even for winter. She looked inflated; the coat was pulled tight and she was only able to zip up halfway. I wondered if she had dark nipples or a birthmark underneath.

'Anu, are you still there?'

'Yes, I'm here.'

I could hear her rustling around on the other end. 'Have you gone outside today?'

'No,' I said. 'Not today.'

'Why not? It's a lovely morning.'

'It's too cold. I want to stay warm.'

I could hear doors opening and closing and the jingling of keys down the phone. 'You've got coats. Go put one on and walk around, it only needs to be a minute or two.'

Outside, I watched a man carrying four shopping bags, two in either hand. They were bulky and overfilled, objects pressing tightly into the plasticated sides. 'What if I get lost? It's a big world out there. If I got lost now, it would be all your fault.'

'Oh, just stop it, you're being silly now,' she said, spitting the last two words. The noise on the other end stopped, and I could hear her breathing. 'You're not young anymore, Anu. How on earth are you ever going to meet someone? If you're not careful, you're going to be alone for the rest of your life.'

'I'm not alone,' I said. 'I know lots of people.'

The Window People

'You're not talking about those people you watch out your window, are you? Tell me you're not still doing that. Don't think I forgot what I saw,' she said. One of the man's grocery bags split, the milk carton burst, and oranges rolled across the pavement and got trodden underfoot. 'Answer me, Anu.'

'No, I don't do that anymore.'

There was silence on the other end, and I checked my phone to see if we had gotten disconnected.

'Anu?' she said.

'Yes?'

'Leave that apartment.'

I heard the click as she hung up, and the phone screen went dark.

HANA FAZAL

What Endures

7.

The open-air cooking area was divided off from the enormous internal courtyard by a knee-high, uneven adobe wall. Myra was hunched on a low stool, staring into the pewter light. Her hands were on automatic, dicing an onion against the pad of her thumb. She was only just becoming sensible to the flesh-burn in her crotch and a growing sense she wanted to be left alone to consider the immensity of what had happened to her. The sudden gnashing of paan-cracked teeth made that impossible.

‘Beti,’ Fatima, squatting close by, was speaking. ‘My ancestors founded this village, you know. Every Akbar man has been its *chaudhary*.’ Her thick-lipped mouth was stained yellow, betel red and black. It stood out in an otherwise cadaverous face.

‘My great-uncle was the first minister of the Punjab – straight after Partition. In the city where you come from, the Mir Akbar district is named after my family.’ Myra nodded, though Fatima was talking in Punjabi and no matter how much people told her the languages were similar, she always struggled to keep up. Weary as she was, she realised this was some kind of initiation and she ought to show deference.

‘When I was a little girl, I wore kurtas made from silks carried by donkeys over the snow peaks of the Himalayas on the Karakorum Highway, all the way from China. My *umma* used to jangle with more gold bangles on our toilet visits to the crop fields at night than any other woman in the village. Beti, everyone would do their business on Akbar land in honour of our wealth and status.’ Fatima’s index finger struck at an imaginary point of reference in the air.

‘My *umma* and my late husband’s *umma* were sisters, you know.’ Here she broke off, taken up by some faraway thought. Then, in a tight

voice, 'He was taken from us too soon. Leaving me with two unmarried daughters!' The pointy-fingered hand fisted, turned on its side and beat at her chest. Myra stopped chopping, unsure what to do. Umma bore the loss of three sons with quiet dignity. Her mother-in-law's gesture seemed too exaggerated to be wholly real and only a moment earlier she had been bragging about her family. Fatima tilted her head at her, which Myra interpreted as an entreaty for sympathy and furrowed her brow in response. After all, Fatima's bereavement was true enough and Myra was only too aware that unmarried daughters without a father were also to be pitied, like mothers without sons and sisters without brothers.

Fatima leant towards her and before Myra could understand what was happening, her mother-in-law inserted the heel of her palm into the dip of Myra's eye socket. '*Chup, chup*, Beti. That's enough crying.' Fatima's hand glided down Myra's cheek, wiping away nothing.

Just as quick, her mother-in-law pulled away, picking up a desiccated cowpat and tearing into it. Its powdered sweetness puffed into the air.

For a moment, Myra doubted herself, wondering if she really had shed tears. Her *umma* never stinted on telling her she was too quick to emotion. Again, before she could make any sense of it, Fatima dropped her handful and was hovering over her once more. 'Beti, it is *your* duty to breed the next generation.' She pressed Myra's knee with her fingertips, as if to imprint the words on her new daughter-in-law. 'Strong Akbar boys.'

Myra looked down – too embarrassed to keep Fatima's gaze. Her eye fell on the dark stain of cowpat Fatima had left on her gold-applique, scarlet *lenga*. She glanced up; Fatima too had spied it. An awkwardness sprang up between them. Myra shrank back onto her sandals, her body weight branding the unfamiliar soft clay under her feet with the round dents of her glittering high heels. She was all out of sorts. An exaggerated, lumbering mass under the heavy, embroidered outfit. Fatima's eyes creased and her lips retreated. If Myra had not cried before, she was in danger of doing so now. What could she do? Had she not overslept, she could have gone looking for her trousseau before anyone else arose. The question of its whereabouts now was redundant; the transgression all over her in livid red.

Fatima turned away – disgusted or disappointed, Myra didn't care. She was just thankful for relief from scrutiny.

It didn't last long.

Fatima reached for a dented tin tray of mustard greens and pushed it towards Myra. 'Beti,' her voice hardening, 'my son will awake soon, hungry as an ox.'

Myra chopped faster.

She let go the fist of onions into the steel lid of the cooking *handi*; it was sitting on the horseshoe curve of one half of a twin clay oven. She would leave off chopping the mustard greens until the onions were frying to make the best use of her time. Fatima would surely take note. Her conscientiousness made her want to laugh. She was just beginning to sense how battered she was feeling from her husband's ardour, while her mind was in disarray from the unfamiliar and the absurdity of wearing her hefty wedding attire to make breakfast, and yet she was in thrall to Umma's training.

She tilted her head, surveying the insides of the two cookers and found a mound of ash. Straightening up, anxiety coiled itself in her belly. She had never cooked on a real fire before. Nor did she have a clue what she might use for fuel.

Fatima was flaking tobacco into the crushed patty with fingers as sun-blackened as her face. Myra sensed her stop what she was doing and take her in. She wanted to avoid her mother-in-law's gaze as much as she wanted to solve the fuel problem. She peered about her; it spawned a longing to look around the house. No time for that now. Myra shuffled sideways in her crouched position; the weight of her embroidered dupatta dragged it downward where it caught under her heels. Heat swelled into her face. A sensation stirred inside her; she had the presentiment it had the power to shake her to the core.

Bunching the chiffon up, she piled it into her lap, burying the feeling.

To one side of the cooker was equipment for making chapattis. To the other, an oversized tin of ghee and a box of matches. Behind her, on a mud shelf that had been fashioned into the wall, were piles of stainless-steel crockery and cooking pots. On the ground, close by, was a fat earthenware water pot with a ladle resting on its clay lid. The thought of its slaking cool awakened a raging thirst in her. Something told her that if she stopped to take a drink – before she had got the fire going and the food cooking – it would be another black mark against her. But she was none the wiser

about what to use for fuel.

There was nothing left for it. She gave her mother-in-law a pleading look, avoiding saying a word, unable, as yet, to call her Umma. Fatima gestured with her chin towards a room at the back of the house. Myra sprang up, not just from a pressing need to escape Fatima's gaze but also because she sensed she had been given all the help she would get.

As Myra got up, some kind of bodily fluid escaped from her tender place. Viscous trickle on the inside of her thigh. A fit of pique overcame her. Umma had not warned her of any of it: the splitting pain, nor the layering of injury because her husband – who she would surely fail to recognise in the daylight – would enter her a second time. Nor did she utter a word about the animal nature of it: that her husband would behave like he was possessed by djinns. Nor did Umma think to mention that the following morning her mother-in-law would care only for how ravenous her son would be when he awoke. And that, though Fatima knew only too well how it was for a new bride, she would not even ask how she was feeling.

Myra had barely taken a step when Fatima's voice drew her back. 'Beti, you better get a move on. After breakfast, when you have washed the pots, you need to start on the house.' She pointed towards the veranda. 'The rooms need dusting. Sweeping too. And mopping with a wet rag. A pile of dirty clothes has built up in the washroom. You will see to them, too.'

Myra glanced at the numerous doors lining the back of the veranda and felt something rising in her chest. Fatima's rapping foot told her that whatever feelings Myra might have on the matter, she had better keep them to herself.

'Yes, Umma.'

The words just slipped out. Myra wanted to rip them out of the air. She had to move away.

She walked in the vague direction Fatima had indicated. The sudden liberty to take in the house no longer of interest. She walked towards several dusty red hens, clucking and pecking their way across the courtyard, taking flight as she neared. She noted a concrete square recess in the ground with a hand water pump attached to its edge. Something else she had never used before. She circled a solitary lemon tree in the middle of the vast rectangle, its thick head of foliage the same deep green

as its unripe fruit. She wanted to go around it a second time – she could not explain why – something contrary in her that wanted to confound Fatima, who was doubtless watching her every move. Her gaze fell to the floor. She wanted to cast off her gold sandal and plant its sole in the ground. Watch it take root and sprout. See if it would grow. She was only just beginning to understand: there was an undercurrent in her. It was the thing that made her behave as she did after the woman was murdered in her neighbourhood. The thing that had made Umma once hold her down when she was a little girl, determined to teach her how to master her feelings: how to endure. Umma always knew it. Only she did not. What if she could not endure? What then?

A cock crowed, making her look up. It was on the top of the latrine wall hopping between discs of cowpat left out to dry in the sun. The light was becoming more ferrous. It gave her the odd feeling the sun would not come up. Not that morning.

The scent of cardamom chai coming from the neighbours taunted her. After she had quenched her thirst with water, she would put on some tea. Drink cups of it while the food was cooking. The dense savour of brewed-in chai was on her tongue; it gave her new energy. She hurried over to the back of the house, stooping to enter a doorless room, avoiding the one next door from where a powerful odour of dung emanated.

Inside, the only light came from the courtyard behind her. It was enough to see the room was spacious and constructed from unrendered brick and there was a door in the opposite wall. Underfoot, the spike and crunch of something: a forest floor of dried-out grasses, reeds, grain sheafs, twigs, and thin branches. She crouched down and scouted for the fattest branches she could find. She stopped what she was doing, wondering how they would possibly catch light. She dropped the bundle, replacing it with an assortment of everything she saw, a mixture of kindling and fuel. She had not grown up in the countryside, but she was not stupid. Fatima would see. Cradling an armful of tinder, she arose. A musty fungal odour followed her up. She peered around her. It made no sense; everything in the room was dry as bone. She crouched down again to get a better view, expecting to see something rotting in the vegetation beneath her. Nothing of the sort. But there it was again: more intense this time. Another possibility pricked her eyes with tears. She had washed as

best she could earlier, in the latrine. It must have been the fluid that had escaped her moments ago. How could she ever become accustomed to it? A woman's veil was not to protect her from harm, but to conceal her shame from others.

She got up once again, fixing her gaze on the unusual shine of the door bolt. Polished from wear, it was slung to one side. The door that presumably led outside was unlocked.

Myra was pulled towards it. Putting her ear against the wood panelling, she sensed the thrum of large animals. She pushed at the door with her hip. It eased open with barely a creak.

Outside, nothing was as she expected.

The breaking dawn was the blush-pink of Kashmiri tea. It hovered in the distance over a vast plain of farmland dotted with trees – of which she recognised only acacia and almond. A solitary figure carrying a giant load on their head emerged from the crops and onto the wide empty dirt track that separated the land from the houses. Their salwar was hitched up, shins bare, the flow of a dupatta trailing behind. Myra was astonished, gaping as the person neared and disappeared as she turned the corner. Sure enough, it was a woman.

Myra stepped out of the house and onto a hard surface of inlaid brick. Not a soul was about. No vehicle passed. No horns hooted. No traders shouting their wares. The air was thick with the trills and chirrups of warblers and bulbuls and the occasional screech of a parakeet. She must have been deaf on the other side of the wall.

She drank in the scene. The overturned cart, to her left, the tines of its yoke sunk deep into sandy earth. Forgotten, broken or unused. Next to it was a rusty metal barrel, its top sawn off and filled to the brim with water. For the hens perhaps – though their claws would surely be ripped to death on those serrated edges! Beyond that an open drain, then the dirt track, blanching white in the rising sun and rutted by cartwheels and the tread-marks of enormous tractor-sized tyres. The roadside was spotted with man-sized mounds: rubble, shorn shrubbery and vegetable fodder. Animal troughs too. Water buffalo, goats and chickens were feeding in separate clusters around them – any noise drowned out by birdsong.

The swish of a tail over to the right. Two water buffalo, each with its head inside separate, parallel troughs pushed up against the exterior wall

of the house. The rump of a third just disappearing, at the entreaty of a hand, via another doorway, into the room from where the strong smell of dung had come. A kurta billowed. Not Fatima's. She was sure to be in the kitchen awaiting Myra's imminent return. A sister then. Razia, the youngest, or Jamila, the elder of the two – she was ashamed she did not know which was which other than that both were younger than Sajid. The door bumped shut. The thought of her sister-in-law performing some daily chore with livestock outside – unchaperoned – tingled up her spine.

Then – though she heard nothing – she felt the presence of someone else, on the far side of the nearest buffalo. Inching forward, she peered around the animal. It was the other sister, sitting on a three-legged stool with a tin pail at her feet. A lean cheek was flush against the animal's belly. Her eyes were shut. Her hand was massaging, coaxing the jets of milk that sprayed into the bucket. A warmth spread through Myra. Everything had changed for her, but it was changing into something else. She was not alone. She would make friends with her sisters-in-law and relish such liberties as they had. Umma had promised her greater freedom in marriage. She was right.

Daylight rubbed out the dark. She felt a pang of regret at misjudging Fatima. She alone in the household had experienced what Myra had. The way she had looked away from Myra's bridal outfit that morning might have been a moment of shared understanding. Fatima had not needed to ask her how she was feeling because she already knew. All married women knew. Her childish stories from her youth might have been designed to put Myra at her ease. That chest-beating grief: a performance that perhaps said more of how little practiced a woman was at having a voice. By saying nothing about Myra's first night with her husband, by wiping away her imaginary tears, Fatima might have meant to commune with her. Hoping to teach her, just like Umma, that she must learn to endure. The sooner she did, the sooner she could be happy. Umma was happy, after all. The pain of Sajid's passion would pass and no doubt become less so over time.

She turned around and went back inside. Crossing the courtyard, the bundle still in her arms, she sensed Fatima's eyes already on her. Her mother-in-law was holding onto the crushed patty with a rigidity in her fingers that looked like impatience. Myra got down onto her haunches and let go the firewood at her feet. She selected the flintiest, driest of her

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hoard, and arranged the kindling in both ovens. She picked up the box of matches and threw a lit match inside, sparking a fire instantly. Then she fed it with increasingly larger pieces of tinder until she was sure it had taken. She had lit her first fire. She glanced up at Fatima, pleased with herself.

Her mother-in-law's mouth twisted. Her lips unhinged. A scowl appeared. 'At this rate, Beti, we'll eat breakfast at lunchtime.'

Myra attempted a smile. 'I'll get faster as everything becomes familiar. You'll see, Umma.'

Fatima assessed her with a half-closed eye. Then she threw the patty onto the fire. That was enough for Myra, for now.

TARA GUHA

Legs 11

1.

‘Women,’ says Clive, fixing his pale blue eyes on Sarah, ‘Women are a particular problem.’

Heads swivel in her direction. Sarah is not the only woman in the meeting, but thanks to Clive, she has just become its focal point. The essence of woman. She sits up straighter; surreptitiously, under the table, brings together knees which had been spread comfortably in wide-legged trousers.

Sarah nods. ‘I know.’ It comes out regretfully. She is the apologist for her sex.

‘And, as for middle-aged women – well, the downward trajectory from age thirty is quite staggering.’

Sarah raises her forty-two-year-old chin a little – not so much in defiance, à la Scarlett O’Hara, but to disguise the second chin gestating beneath it. Facing her is a series of gloomy oil paintings mounted on a wood-panelled wall. She catches the eye of one of the men from the paintings; he too seems disappointed.

‘Of course, there are many reasons for this,’ continues Clive, and a Mexican wave of sad nodding spreads down the crescent-shaped wooden table. They are all sitting along the same side, a tableau of faithful disciples leaning towards their master. It’s unusual for meetings to be held in one of the main council chambers and it feels awkward. The possibility of roundtable discussion is literally removed.

‘Some of these are beyond our scope. But I am passionate,’ Clive bangs his fist on the table as mouths fall open a bit, ‘passionate about getting women moving.’

There’s a short silence in which the fusty old council chamber

reverberates with Clive's passion. Everyone knows to sit tight, to give him his moment of stillness before adding their applause. Everyone knows he'll deliver another rousing line or two and then leave it to them to fix the boring details.

Clive drops his voice. 'We must also consider the delicate issue of *Asian* women.'

Mutters of agreement and a couple of rueful sighs in a room devoid of Asian women. Sarah starts to feel hot. It's annoyance, not perimenopause, but there's still a risk that her hormones will take up the baton and immolate her in front of the Chief Officer.

'As we know, this group has the lowest activity rate in the borough. The question is, what are we going to do about it?'

Clive lets the question hang as he elicits eye contact from each white face in the room, many attached to bodies which have clearly not been getting their 10,000 steps. Clive has a nose for apathy, if not absurdity. He sniffs it out and hunts it down. Kevin Powell, sitting next to Clive (of course), rolls his shoulders, primed for the task of hauling middle-aged Asian women to their feet.

Clive leans in. 'Questions like this are sometimes rhetorical, are they not?' Confusion creases Kevin's eyes: is *this* a rhetorical question? No-one answers.

'Come on, wake up, people.' Clive raises his voice. 'I have major news to impart and you lot look ready for your cocoa and Coronation Street. I know it's nearly the end of the day, but you shouldn't need reminding that we're still on the taxpayer's clock.' A hint of smile suggests Clive is not quite as angry as he sounds.

He picks up a stapled booklet and waves it, prompting several people to pick up their copy of the same document.

'Plenty to dissect here. As we've discussed, our figures in West Ryedale are a little worse than the national average.' He pauses. 'One could say a little *dumplier*.'

Nervous titters as people get the joke. Sarah clenches her stomach muscles. Gallingly, Clive, in his early sixties, is in better shape than most of them. His shirt sleeves are rolled up to reveal lightly haired, lightly muscled forearms. She moves her eyes back to the booklet in front of her denoting physical activity levels by region, age, gender and ethnicity.

Several numbers are ringed in red.

‘But with every challenge comes opportunity. And today I’m here to tell you about a particularly exciting opportunity for West Ryedale.’

Sarah looks up. ‘I’m glad I got your attention there, Miss Overton.’

Sarah doesn’t hear him doing this to the men – this pseudo-humorous habit of using her title as if she’s a schoolmistress. She’s a bloody missus anyway.

‘And, yes, *opportunity* in this case means money – from the purse of NHS England, no less.’

Murmurs of surprised pleasure. Given that the next pages of the booklet have subtitles like ‘heart disease,’ ‘breast cancer’ and ‘diabetes,’ the connection is not hard to see.

‘Not only that...’ A dramatic pause, a veritable drumroll. ‘I’m delighted to tell you we’ve been chosen as one of twelve local pilot areas... to the tune of *two point five million pounds.*’

The room erupts. Clive has scored a late goal in extra time, the meeting having already overrun by fifteen minutes. He raises a hand over the chorus of congratulations.

‘Don’t thank me. I’m glad we can do the right thing by the people of West Ryedale. Naturally, we have plans to make and recruitment to commence, but that is not for today. All I ask is that you get your thinking caps on. We’ll be looking for one or two flagship projects to catch the national eye. And, for once, we won’t need to implement them on a shoestring. Think big, all of you. Spread the word to your teams and we’ll reconvene in a couple of weeks.’

Clive gets to his feet. It’s an old trick; always leave your audience wanting more. But there’s scope for a last hurrah. He pauses with a hand on the back of his carved, wooden chair and the discussion that has started to swell dies away. ‘Incidentally, I will be overseeing the choosing of the flagship projects and will *personally* champion both the projects and the staff members who put them forward. So, consider that as you’re watching Corrie tonight!’ He winks and sweeps out of the room.

There’s a brief hush, as twelve senior managers privately entertain the prospect of being the chosen one. Different departments are represented along the table and all have an interest in taking charge of the pot. Sarah has her Public Health hat on, Kevin Powell is batting for Regeneration

and there are other competitors from the Neighbourhood Team, Sports, Children's Services, Health & Social Care and Leisure & Culture. It's going to be a bun fight. People push their chairs back and loosen their ties. Sarah stretches her legs in front of her.

'Well, this is exciting.' Kevin addresses the room. He's not the most senior person, but he's quick to grab the initiative. Any second now he'll claim inside information.

'I did have some sense this was coming but I'm delighted by the budget. Shall we start throwing ideas around?'

Sarah bites her lip. She's supposed to be cooking tonight but there's no way she's leaving the field clear for an unbridled Kevin. She grabs her phone from her bag and jabs out a message to her husband.

Kevin seems to have decided he'll be Chair. He's only been in post for a year, but anyone who has 'come from the commercial sector' – Kevin used to work for a supermarket – gets treated like a seer, instead of someone who doesn't really understand what councils do. For some reason Sarah keeps crossing paths, and swords, with him. He's difficult to work with and nakedly ambitious. Sarah likes to keep her ambition clothed and her interactions civilised.

'So, people, let's get creative. We need high-quality concepts to make everyone sit up and take notice. Or stand up and get moving! Who's going to kick off?'

Sarah has a suspicion bordering on conviction that Kevin is empty of original ideas. Setting up a brainstorming, or crowd-sourcing, session gives him an opportunity to plunder the pickings.

'We need to think about what motivates women.'

'The age-old question – what do women want?'

Sarah shares an eye roll with a female colleague. 'Shouldn't we be talking directly to middle-aged women and Asian women?'

Instant agreement. The latest round of diversity training means no-one can claim to be ignorant of the principles of co-production. But Kevin is on his feet, striding towards the flipchart in the top corner. He smiles directly at Sarah, who feels herself recoiling as if he's belched in her face.

'Of course we'll consult down the line, but we can get the ball rolling now – we do have several women in the room! Anything you want to lead with, Sarah?'

Nothing I want to share with you, says her rigid smile. She glances at her phone; no response from Drew.

The group notes that women are generally short of time and need ‘practical solutions on the doorstep.’ Kevin writes PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS on the flipchart. A multicultural dance programme gets people excited: BANGRA! writes Kevin. Sarah’s phone buzzes and her stress levels spike when she sees it’s from Jack, her eleven-year-old son.

- Where ru

Sarah glances around and mumbles a vague ‘sorry’ as she types back under the table.

- At work. Why? Xx
- Forgot my keysss

Shit.

- Can you message dad? I’m busy love
- Ye
- Bea should be home soon x
- K

Sarah resurfaces into a discussion that is taking a bizarre turn. One of the older women is enthusing about hoovering to music – ‘Great exercise and great fun! How about a cleaning group?’

Doug from Sports sniggers. ‘Plenty of council buildings could do with a clean. Stick ‘Best of the 80s’ on, kill two birds with one stone.’

There is jovial agreement that women cleaning council buildings for free is ‘not a good look in 2022.’ Sarah grips her unresponsive phone and inwardly curses her unresponsive husband. Jack won’t come to any harm but she doesn’t like to think of him there, a latchkey kid without a key. Drew says she’s overprotective; no doubt he’ll talk later about the useful lesson Jack will take from today. Sarah cares more that her son has seemed sad ever since starting high school.

Kevin is now engaging the Children’s team about the role of education in women’s sedentary behaviour. Sarah has had enough.

‘I know education is important, but I just don’t buy that it’s the main problem here. Middle-aged women are juggling kids, careers, ageing parents’ – she stops at menopause – ‘and it’s far more likely women will be carers.’ Her voice vibrates annoyingly and she feels herself going red. ‘Especially in the Asian community, with different generations living together.’

Kevin folds his arms. ‘So you don’t think education is important?’

Sarah stares back. ‘I think you’ll find I started by saying that education is important.’ A couple of people shift in their seats, possibly uncomfortable, possibly excited at the prospect of conflict. ‘With all due respect, Kevin, a conversation about women is probably better led by women.’

It’s Kevin’s turn to redden, standing by his flipchart with its most recent word of CLEANING!

‘Somebody had to step up, and *with all due respect*, not everyone in the room has seemed fully engaged.’

They glare at each other and Sarah resists the urge to aim her water bottle at his prominent front teeth. An actual cleaner sticks her head round the door and seems astonished to see a full room of people at 5.30pm. Sarah takes her cue and leaves them all to it.

2.

‘Can you believe it? I mean, what a ... are the children around?’ Sarah was already ranting, trapped in the hallway by their excited rescue mongrel, Roger.

Drew stuck his head out from the kitchen. ‘You sit down and I’ll get us a child-free beer. Roger – here, boy.’

Sarah dumped her bag and attempted to find space on the coat pegs piled up with puffer jackets, narrowing an already narrow hallway. Shoes had been randomly kicked off instead of lined-up on the shoe rack. She arranged her own and everyone else’s with a sigh. Roger ambushed her from behind and she nearly faceplanted in the shoes.

‘DOWN, boy!’

Someone without children and dogs had obviously designed the hallway. Roger trotted after her into the lounge where their Victorian

terrace opened up and showed its true proportions, high ceilings and a big bay window with original stained glass. Sarah breathed deeper.

Drew brought in cans and glasses. 'Sorry about the confusion. I left the office straight away and thought Jack would tell you.'

'Was he okay?'

'Once he'd seen off the pack of wolves in the veg patch ... of course he was okay. He won't forget his keys again though.' Drew hooked a finger round the ring-pull of the can. Sarah savoured the click, gurgle and fizz as he poured them both a glass of craft ale.

'Drinking on a Wednesday?' Their daughter, Bea, brushed past them on the way to the kitchen. Sarah and Drew made a face at each other.

'Bad day, I think,' whispered Sarah and Drew put a finger to his lips.

'I know you're talking about me,' came a voice from the kitchen. 'Just because you can't see me it doesn't mean I'm not here. It's called object permanence. Babies get it around six months.'

Her parents mock-grimaced. 'Glad to see you've been learning your psychology, darling.' Sarah hesitated – should she pursue a *how was your day* conversation? Drew shook his head.

Bea appeared again, clutching a glass of juice. Sarah couldn't help noticing that her hair needed washing. Should she say something? Her own mother used to say, *If I don't tell you, nobody will*. Mostly it would have been better if nobody had.

'I'm fine, Mum. You don't need to look at me like that.'

'I'm not looking like anything. Are you – um, what are your plans tonight?'

'My *plans*?' So much disdain for such a simple word. 'Just another exciting evening washing my hair and watching YouTube.'

Sarah relaxed. 'Ah, great, love.'

Bea scowled. 'You're so transparent, Mum.' She stomped upstairs, muttering.

Sarah collapsed onto the sofa, followed by the dog and Drew. 'Another fail.'

'She's a teenage girl, love.'

'Don't I know it?' Sarah closed her eyes as a warm, slightly smelly head settled onto her lap. 'What's Jack doing now?'

'Starts with X and ends with box.'

‘Silly me. We can’t let him stay on it all night.’

‘We won’t.’ Drew squeezed Sarah’s knee. ‘Fancy some food?’

‘Only after I’ve bored you with a full account of my day.’

‘Ah! Do we need to talk about Kevin?’

This was not the first time the joke had been made. Sarah stuck her tongue out at her husband and launched into a blow-by-blow of the meeting.

‘I’m not sure I really want to be championed by Clive, though. What would that even *mean*?’ Images of Clive raising her hand in a boxing ring as the crowd cheered. Other more unsettling images.

‘What it would mean, my love, is a promotion. And the chance to kick Kevin’s ass. Any ideas yet?’

‘Well ...’

‘Excellent. Imagine I’m Deborah Meaden. Pitch to me.’ Drew crossed his legs and tilted his head.

‘You’re putting me off.’

Drew uncrossed his legs.

‘I’ve not worked it all out yet. But the idea is about cricket.’

‘Now you’re talking. Is this work or foreplay?’

Sarah laughed and slapped her husband lightly. Their shared passion for the real beautiful game, the thing that had brought them together in the first place, continued to be an anchor in their marriage.

‘I was thinking a mixed-age women’s cricket tournament. The only women’s cricket round here is for twenty year olds. I know because I’ve looked before, by the way.’

‘You dark horse. I didn’t know you actually wanted to *play* cricket.’

‘Well, you know I love commentating from the sofa, but it seems a bit ridiculous that I’ve never played with anyone apart from my dad and brother. Not even you.’

‘I’ll play with you anytime, love, but nothing beats your sofa rants about Jonny Bairstow’s shot selection.’ Drew put his arm round her. ‘Still, I can see you in whites, all padded up ... Sorry, go on.’

‘So – we give grants to local groups who want to form a team, provide coaching. Cricket’s a massive part of Asian culture, so hopefully it will get Asian women interested. What does that smile mean?’

Drew blew a kiss at his wife, now sitting bolt upright, beer forgotten

in her hand.

'You know I love it when you talk cricket.'

'Drew ...'

'Sorry, I'll focus. Women's cricket is getting more high-profile but you're right, most women never get the chance to play.' He paused and she saw the communications man take over, internally testing out the idea. 'There's a community cohesion angle after all the Yorkshire Cricket racism. I think you're onto something.'

'But Kevin will also be desperate to win.'

Drew smiled. 'Your language rather gives you away. Do we win and lose in a council, or do we *work co-operatively for the best outcomes for all?* Mind you, what would I know? I'm just a capitalist twat.'

Sarah smiled back. 'That's one word for it. How was your client meeting?'

'Putty in my hand. They've signed for a year.'

'Hey, well done.' They clinked glasses. 'And how was the new person? Amy?'

'Oh, yeah, she's funny. Might overstep the line sometimes, I reckon, but hasn't yet.'

'Glad to hear it.' Sarah registered how little she liked the idea of another woman making her husband laugh. People (women) regularly reminded her that he was a good-looking guy, which she received as something of a backhanded compliment with 'punching above your weight' connotations.

Drew winked at her. 'Imagine spending all your working days thinking about cricket as well as your leisure time!'

Sarah rolled her eyes. 'I'm not that bad.'

'Oh, you are and I love you for it.' He stretched a hand and started walking his fingers up the inside of her thigh. 'How about you grab yourself a bit of food and we reconvene after the tea interval?'

MIKE HARPER

Binary Magic

1. High Treason

Lydia's anguished cries echoed through the vaulted stone ceilings of the prince's chambers.

'Push now my lady!' Sharlee was becoming concerned for her young ward's safety. She had brought life into this world on countless occasions, but she could not remember a confinement as fraught as this. She loved Lydia like her own, having looked after her and protected her all the long years since Lydia's mother had been taken. Lydia was pale, streaked with sweat, eyes rolling. It was clear to Sharlee that she was close to exhaustion.

'Look at me!' Sharlee commanded as Lydia writhed and then in a softer tone added, 'Come on dear, one last push should do it.'

Lydia's features set with grim determination as she panted. Then gripping handfuls of sodden bedsheets and throwing her head back, roared defiantly as she pushed. Finally the baby came to end her torment.

'Congratulations, my lady; t'is a beautiful girl with golden locks like yours.' Sharlee and a hand maiden, Kiera, worked together to clean up the child.

Lydia propped herself up on one elbow to try and see her baby, fighting to quell her ragged breathing. She caught only a glimpse. The infant was ashen. Sharlee had an intense look as she massaged the baby's chest and then suddenly lifted her by her tiny feet and slapped her back sharply. She finally spluttered a little cry as she drew her first breath. Lydia wept with joy and relief, but then gasped in pain.

'Sharlee, I need to push again,' she screamed, eyes wide and rolling.

'Calm yourself dear. T'is just the doings that sustained the child. It is quite right it should follow. Lie quiet and let mother nature take control.'

Sharlee had explained the process of course, but hysteria clawed at Lydia

now. At that moment, Damik, her beloved husband, appeared through the heavy, velvet drapes that divided their apartments from the bed chamber. A mix of concern and excitement wracked his features.

‘My love, what news?’

Lydia reached out and beckoned to him. ‘We have a daughter,’ she panted, trying to smile.

Damik’s face lit up. He knelt by the bed, taking her hand in both of his, kissed it and held it to his heart, head bowed. ‘My love, you honour me.’ As his eyes rose to meet hers, any celebration was cut short as Lydia screeched in pain.

‘Sharleeeeee!’

Passing the newborn to Keira, Sharlee was with her in an instant. ‘My lord, your lady needs privacy now. Something is wrong.’

Lydia writhed, drained of all colour. Her long hair was matted and plastered to her. Her back arched; a piercing scream escaped her lips.

Damik sprang up and, touching the cheek of the old woman, looked into her grey eyes. ‘Save her,’ he said simply, ‘use every method that may be known to you.’

Consent was silently sought and wordlessly given. His meaning was clear to her. He tried to grasp Lydia’s hand, but she was beyond reason and slapped him away. He turned on his heel and withdrew.

‘I need to push!’ Lydia wailed again.

Sharlee tore back the covers, her eyes going wide. ‘Lydia, take a deep breath for me,’ she whispered, ‘now push again!’

Minutes later, with a last frantic effort, a second child was born. This child thrashed and kicked, twisting this way and that in Sharlee’s hands, the cord entangled around her. She had a look of indignant rage on her tiny face, a shock of dark hair and piercing blue eyes. Lydia’s cries of pain had given way to forlorn sobbing as she looked down at her second daughter.

‘No!’ she wailed, realisation flooding over her. ‘This cannot be! No, no, no!’ She was shuffling backwards on the devastated bed, trying to get away from the child. ‘Damik!’

Sharlee was momentarily rooted to the spot. Twins were now such a rare event. How could this be? She wheeled around to Keira. ‘Leave the child and get out!’ she snapped. ‘Tell his lordship we need him here now

and then wait in the outer chamber. Say nothing! Do you understand?’

The shocked girl nodded and ran out of the room.

Seconds later, Damik burst through the drapes. He looked to the baby in the crib and back to the shocked Sharlee now cradling a flailing second child in her arms.

‘I am so sorry my lord. You have twins.’

‘May I come forth my lord?’

It was Ezra’s voice, aged advisor to King Archaeus, come to convey news of any progress.

‘Come in,’ Damik said quietly.

Ezra took in the scene before him. Damik looked dazed as he held Lydia; she was whimpering and gasping for air. They were on the floor, him sat with his back against the far wall, her prostrate across him, swathed in blood-stained sheets. The room was in disarray. He had passed Keira, crying hysterically in the outer chamber, but she would say nothing. A newborn lay quietly in the crib, neatly swaddled in a crisp white blanket bearing the royal crest in gold thread. But Sharlee was wrestling with a feisty second infant. A moment of quiet realisation. In his long years he had seen many things as he tirelessly served the crown, but he had not expected this, and in the palace of all places.

‘My lord,’ he said quietly, ‘what would you have me tell the king?’

All eyes settled upon Ezra. Sharlee gave him an imploring look but said nothing. This unassuming old man, trusted member of the royal court, suddenly wore the mantle of judge and executioner.

Damik tried to form a response, but the words would not come. It seemed the very air was sucked from the room, the light in his world began to fade. A moment of calm as Lydia held her breath. No one moved. It was Ezra himself who broke the spell.

‘Keira, could you come in here my dear?’ he asked in a level tone.

Keira appeared through the drapes, tear stained and apprehensive. ‘How can I help my lord?’ she said in a tiny voice as she glanced nervously around the room.

Ezra had moved away from them all, toward the great fireplace, on the wall opposite. He had his back to them and was fumbling around inside his robes. As Keira approached cautiously, he turned and produced a piece

of paper, holding it out to her.

‘Could you take this to the king’s chambers my child?’ he asked.

As Keira reached for the paper, Ezra grasped her wrist, closed the distance between them, and swiftly thrust a small dagger between her ribs. He clasped a hand over her mouth, muting a gurgling shriek and cradling her to the ground as her life ebbed away.

‘Forgive me, my child.’

As he stood, he turned to find three pairs of eyes fixed upon him. Sharlee understood, nodded silently and lowered her gaze. Lydia and Damik just stared at him, open mouthed. What madness was this? After the calamity of bearing twins and all that it meant, the king’s advisor had just murdered a young girl in front of the heir to the throne.

It was Damik who recovered first. Untangling himself from Lydia, he scrambled to his feet. Taking great strides across the room, steel sighed against leather as he drew his long knife from its sheath. He shoved Ezra roughly in the chest, and in an instant, had him pinned against the stone wall.

‘Have you lost your mind, old man! Why?’ he demanded, the tip of his blade drawing a crimson bead from the old man’s throat. Ezra did not struggle but dropped his knife.

‘All these years’, he started hurriedly, ‘my allegiance has been to the king and his family.’ Damik released the pressure a little, so Ezra could speak. ‘But I have also stood ready to do whatever must be done if the prophecy were ever to manifest. I believe that time is now, and I think you may recognise it too. If we are to protect your family my lord and preserve the lives of The Pair, then we must act both decisively and quickly. I may have this all wrong and if it is your intention to follow the law and hand over your children, then hand me over as well and I will accept my fate. I have the blood of this girl on my hands; an appalling act for which I alone must bear the consequences. But if this is indeed the prophecy come to pass, and if it is your intention for your children to live, then your family now takes precedence over all else.’

Damik faltered, lowered his knife and released his grip on Ezra. The old man sank to his knees and bowed his head.

‘My lord, my life is yours to command, but if you will allow me the honour, I must protect The Pair.’

Sharlee assumed the same position. ‘With my life,’ she said, ‘I will protect them.’

Damik took it all in. After long years of waiting to be blessed with a child, he suddenly found himself with two – punishable by death for the whole family to stamp out the abomination of twins, to ensure the prophecy of the Binary Pair never came to pass. He teetered on the brink. Two of the most faithful servants of the realm knelt before him ready to lay down their lives to protect the newborn twins; an act of high treason.

‘But why kill Keira?’

‘Because I sent her here, not just to assist Sharlee, but to report back to the king.’

Damik’s mind raced. Keira’s death had brought them a small degree of secrecy then, a few hours at best, but Archaeus knew of Lydia’s confinement. By morning they would all be dead. His beautiful girls and Lydia, the love of his life. How could he make this right? His long military training fought to take over and let reason emerge through emotion, but he could not clear his head.

‘With your permission my lord, Sharlee and I will withdraw to the outer chamber. We will admit no one and await your command.’

Damik waved them away without a word. With a degree of reverence he had never before witnessed, Sharlee helped Lydia back onto the bed and Ezra placed the twin girls beside her. Moving in the quiet yet familiar harmony of a long-devoted couple, they carefully folded Keira’s arms across her lifeless body and lifting her between them, took her out into the outer chamber, trying to avoid the blood pooled on the stone floor.

For the first time, the second child became calm as two little hands reached out and found each other. Damik sat beside them and tried to make sense of it all. A troubled pregnancy had left Lydia drained even before the birth, despite her wide knowledge of herbs and medicines. If this were the prophecy, it would indeed explain her extraordinary symptoms. He looked at his new family. Both girls were calm now; they were a true mix of him and Lydia. One had Lydia’s bright blonde hair but his dark eyes while the other had her blue eyes, but the unruly dark locks were all his. But fear now grew where love should have blossomed.

The law was clear. The prophecy had long said that the magic of a Binary Pair was powerful beyond all imagination and that, worse still, it

Binary Magic

was unpredictable. Legend had it that the magic unleashed could fracture the very fabric of the world, consuming all, as it had in *The Breaking*, over eight hundred years ago. Twins had been put to death within the first day after birth ever since; there were no exceptions. Any parents that tried to run or hide their children were publically tortured to death along with any other siblings and their extended family, to stamp out the risk of further twin births. It was brutal and horrific, but Archaeus was an uncompromising ruler and was convinced it was essential that the magic of old did not run unchecked through the world of men once again. Twin births were now a rare event indeed.

Lydia just lay there, utterly depleted. That the dream of raising a family should now come to this? What should have been a joyous day, was in ruins. Damik was staring at his daughters, lost in thought. She knew Archaeus would show them no mercy when he discovered them. He had upheld the ancient laws a little too enthusiastically and enforced it without exception or mercy. He had never liked her because she was not of noble birth. Damik had married her for love, not power. She was convinced he would not hesitate in executing her and their babies. Surely, he would spare Damik? She would not need to be taken to the block in the morning; her breaking heart would surely take her first. She reached out to Damik and he helped her sit up. They embraced as silent sobs wracked her body.

Lydia drifted into a fitful sleep in the security of Damik's arms. He stared through the tall arched windows that stood open to let in the warm spring air. It was fully dark now and bright moonlight kissed the wave crests far below. How many nights had they stood on that balcony and looked out over the sea? He always found himself drawn to it but could not explain why. Was it the ever-changing surface? Maybe the raw power that it could unleash on the unwary? Perhaps the hypnotic rise and fall of the tide? It fascinated him. It was moody; at times relaxed, but on stormy nights, tempestuous. Lydia was sleeping more deeply now, her warm breath on his neck as her chest rose and fell more evenly, the tension slowly ebbing from her body. The twins slept with their tiny fingers entwined.

Damik extricated himself from Lydia's desperate embrace and walked out onto the balcony. He leant on the balustrade with both hands, head

bowed, shoulders hunched, looking down into the dark waters. The tang of the salt air on his lips. Of late the sea itself seemed unsettled, freak waves behaving in a way he had never seen before. Inexplicable maelstrom without a storm, fast running currents acting against the tide. Tonight, it was choppy with wave crests breaking over one another and yet no wind to drive them. The world, it seemed, was unsettled. Had he believed in such things, he would have perhaps taken more notice of the signs.

Others had noticed, and there had been speculation that it was the gods themselves taking exception to the king's constant war mongering. Archaeus had become increasingly malevolent over the years. His beloved queen had given her life to bring Damik into the world and bitterness had consumed him in the twenty-seven years since. He blamed Damik it seemed and the two had never been close, despite Damik being the king's only son and heir.

Damik despised the constant raiding of the neighbouring lands and the needless bloodshed in the pursuit of greater power and wealth. But publicly he said nothing, diligently executing the role of prince and military commander, conducting his father's orders. In the quiet solitude, a plan was forming in his mind. They would need to act quickly or by morning they would all be dead. He went over and over it. Try as he might, he could see no other way. It would mean heartbreak for them all, desolation and a life of hardship. He breathed in deeply and as he slowly exhaled, so too he let go of any hope of a normal life.

He checked on Lydia and the twins as he crept through to the antechamber. Ezra and Sharlee sat huddled by the fireside, talking quickly in hushed tones. The smell of tallow candles that had burned through the night lay thick in the airless room. They rose as Damik approached.

'My lord,' Ezra began, 'what would you have us do?'

'We run! We will leave the palace, renounce the trappings of office and flee to a remote land where we can live out our lives. Perhaps to Aridia, beyond the Shards, where my father's reach is weak. We must find a ship.'

Ezra looked uneasy.

'I agree, my lord, but a couple travelling with two newborns will arouse suspicion and the squads will be upon you within days. You know the fate of those that run. The risk is too great. The king has a network of informants and with a bounty of one hundred gold pieces for the heads

Binary Magic

of a pair of twins; you will be in just as much danger outside these walls as within.'

'I will not see my family butchered,' spat Damik. 'I see no other way.'

'If this is the prophecy my lord, and this is a Binary Pair, then you and Lydia will both be in danger, along with everyone around you. The twins' magic will be unstable for years to come.'

Damik paced, trying to force clear thought. He ran his hand through his close cropped beard and looked at Ezra.

'What then?' he snarled.

'If you will permit us my lord, we have thought of another way.' Sharlee fell silent, trying to read Damik's troubled face.

'Out with it then,' he snapped.

It was Ezra who spoke next; quickly and matter of fact, in a tactical style, the façade of master and servant briefly discarded. 'Divide and conquer. You must each take a child and run in opposite directions, so as not to arouse suspicion and until we know if they are safe in each other's presence. You should create as much distance between you as possible. You must flee the palace tonight!'

HUSSEINA JAFIYA

Thunder Fire You

Goodbye Masoyina

Masoyina,

I am getting married.

I am getting married to Albaji Apagu. The cattle owner. Yes, the Albaji Apagu who slapped you for feeding one of his cows.

My heart has moved on from you, my love. And no, I'm not getting married to someone else because I don't love you anymore. I still do.

But it's been almost three years since you left home and I've not heard from you. You promised me your heart, you promised me your touch, you promised me a lifetime together till eternity. But my heart is tired of living on your promises.

Promises will not feed me and my family.

So, it's time for me to move on.

To move into the arms of another man.

I won't miss you because my heart is tired of missing you.

My heart will only miss what could have been if you were still here.

Take care, my love.

Take care, Usiju.

I write this letter to tell you the three words my heart has been longing to say ...

Thunder fire you.

Usiju, you!

You left me alone to marry that old baba! I will never forgive you for abandoning me. I hope you die a miserable death and rot in hell! May thunder strike you and that stupid apprenticeship you left me for. Dan banza!

*Anyway, my love,
don't ever come back,*

Thunder Fire You

*don't ever look for me.
If you do, I will kill you.*

*With hatred,
Jagila*

1. Useless Woman

Lala.

The memory jolted me awake, causing a strain in my heart. I held my hand to my chest. The painful memory of his existence pierced through me every time I thought about that idiot. Like the last time I saw him, beneath the iroko tree near Kyanyker river.

'Lala.' The whisper of my lover's words echoed through the night sky, his fingers grazing through the tree behind me. The closest he could ever be. 'Let's go,' he said.

'Mm?' I mumbled, plaiting the strand of my plaited all-back, too shy to look into his beautiful eyes. 'Go where?'

'Far away. Let's run away from this village.'

I looked up at him, the smile on my lips fading. 'Enb? Run away?'

He smiled. 'Yes. Remember Alhaji Bello? That rich businessman from Kano. I am going to be his apprentice.'

I remembered the pang of betrayal I felt as I pulled away from the tree, scowling his way. 'I thought we agreed you wouldn't do it. So why now? Why do you want to leave Maigana? Masoyina, we promised to stay here – together.'

'I know,' he admitted, 'but there is a world out there for you and me. I can feel it. Come with me, Masoyiyata. Let's build a life together in Kano. Open our shop, start a family –'

'No, Usiju,' I said, moving close enough to feel his breath but not to touch him. 'No. We can change their minds. Baba, Mama, even your father. We will convince them.'

'Lala, there will never be a place for us here.'

In that moment, I woke up from a long, impossible dream. Three years later, I knew one thing for sure: Usiju spoke the truth. There truly

Thunder Fire You

was no place in our village for the pairing of a Kambu woman and a lowly Nkyagu. Baba often described them as weak or powerless, like grasshoppers, hopeless insects waiting to be eaten by lizards and frogs. He enjoyed the comparison, but it always left me cold.

My bamboo door opened, the early morning sunlight blazing through the darkness of my hut. I groaned. Who was this interrupter of the early morning?

'Aunty Jagila!' Mada, my closest stepdaughter, dashed inside, panicking like there was fire on the mountain. 'Hurry, oh!'

I sat up on my mud bed begrudgingly, squinting my tired eyes.

'Hurry as how?'

'Mama is coming for you. You forgot to follow her to the river this morning, ko? She's about to come and swallow you up!'

My eyes widened, their tiredness gone.

I'd forgotten to help Mama Wasini fetch water for the house drum. It was the third time this month that I'd fallen her hand. *Kai*, Jagila, you have entered this old woman's pot of soup again. Ah!

I jumped out of bed and tied my wrapper tightly around my chest before picking up my slippers and running barefoot. Just as I stepped outside, I heard, 'Jagila!'

Mama Wasini was in the compound.

'Come this way!' Mada said, tugging me out back of the hut and to the clay fence. There was no way out here, just the fence looming ahead, blocking any hope of escape.

'What are we doing here?' I asked.

Mada knelt on all fours, exposing her back to the sky. 'Climb my back!' she urged.

'Mada, you want to break your back, ne?'

'Do you want Mama to make you clean cow shit with your hand again?'

Omo. I mounted Mada's back, then threw my slippers over the fence before scaling it myself. After a brief glance back at her, I dropped down.

I stood up, thick with relief. 'Finally,' I said, 'that witch will not –'

'Kill you, *abi*?'

There she was. Mama Wasini, standing right in front of me.

'*Kaka*, look I –'

She pulled me by the left ear, not waiting for me to finish my sentence.

It was the same ear she always dragged whenever I was in trouble.

'Kaka, Kaka, wait.' I yanked away, turning my face, 'Abeg pull the other ear. This one is paining me.'

She bit the back of her index finger, probably wondering what kind of idiotic co-wife Alhaji Apagu had brought into their home. I had only been married to him for six months, but my trouble was new every morning.

'This child – you will not kill me in this house!' She pulled the same hurting ear and led me back into the compound.

Our husband, Alhaji Apagu, was already outside his hut, sitting on a wooden stool under the tree and brushing his teeth with a chewing stick. He paused to look at me and Mama Wasini before turning away to shake his head in disdain. There was nothing new under the sun, just another first and last wife drama.

I looked at him, hoping he might take pity and save me from the wrath of Mama Wasini. But he continued brushing his teeth, turning a blind eye to my troubles like he always did.

Mama Wasini and his other two wives treated me like a weed growing in their beautiful garden. They hated my slackness, that I did not work as hard as them in the kitchen or on the farm. And Alhaji, who in the first month of our marriage had treated me like a precious egg, had grown distant and resentful, all because of one misfortune: my inability to conceive.

'*Maiya*, you've killed your children, you cannot come and kill me too,' he would say, believing that I used juju to kill all the eggs in my womb.

Once, I remember saying, 'Maybe your *azzakari* is too wrinkled to do the job.'

He hit my head and cursed, 'Useless woman.'

That was all I was to him, a useless woman, not a junior wife, and he let Mama Wasini and the others treat me accordingly.

Along with my idle nature, Mama Wasini hated my youthfulness. She was always looking for flaws to pull me from what she called my 'high horse'. If she didn't call my pointed nose a disfigured flute, she would call my breasts baby lemons.

Inside the storage hut, Mama Wasini handed me one of Alhaji's old straw hats. 'Take this,' she said. 'You're going to the pasture today.'

'Ah,' I pouted, folding my hands and refusing to take the hat, 'I cannot

tend to the cows today. The sun is too hot.'

Last time she gave me this punishment, I had ended up trekking around with Alhaji Apagu's herdsboys for seven hours, going from one village to another just to feed and water the smelly cows.

'Who is asking for your permission?' she hissed, throwing the hat at my feet and stomping out of the hut. As she left, she made sure to add, 'With that body like unripe mango.'

I approached the herdsboys, who were gathered near the open field by the market square. Without a word I sat beneath the nearest tree and observed their teenage lounging, all while the cows grazed peacefully on the lush pasture beyond. I adjusted the oversized straw hat on my head, shielding myself from the scorching midday sun. Mama Wasini, thunder fire you for this.

'Aunty Jagila!' a familiar voice rang in the distance.

I looked around to find Mada running towards me, a new straw hat dancing atop her small round head.

'What are you doing here?' I asked as she came to a stop in front of me, panting and sweating like a hungry goat.

'I came to join you,' she said, sitting next to me. 'I don't want to join Mama and those winches in the kitchen.'

I chuckled. Tell me about it.

Mada rested her head on my shoulder and started gisting me about what happened by the river this morning, how the wives of one of our neighbours had fought over a broken clay pot.

I smiled at her dramatic retelling as she laughed and imitated the voices of the women by the river. Mada was much more like a sister than a stepdaughter. She was seventeen, just two years younger than me, and we could have even passed for twins at a push. Unlike Alhaji Apagu's other wives and children, she made sure I was taken care of, always helping me to fetch water by the river, adding fuel to my kerosene lamp and helping to sweep my hut.

Mada stopped talking and looked up at me, grinning from ear to ear.

'What are you smiling at?' I asked.

She covered her face, as though shy. 'I don't know if I should say,' she said, and I could see that she was blushing, 'but let me get this off my

chest.'

She paused, letting suspense build unbearably.

'I've found the man I want to marry.'

For a moment, I was purely thrilled. But my heart soon sank as I pictured myself all alone with Mama Wasini and her coven of winches. How would I survive without my guiding angel?

'You don't look so happy, Auntie Jagila,' she said. 'Did I say something wrong?'

I scoffed and squeezed her shoulders. 'What are you saying? I'm very happy for you. I will just miss you when you're gone.'

'It's not like I am leaving tomorrow.' She snorted, '*Sha*, I only met him today.'

Then she gisted me about the handsome young man she had encountered by the river after the neighbour's wives' scuffle was over. A ripe banana, he was, so ripe and fresh that he could pass for the son of a chieftain – he was a nobleman, maybe even closely related to the Emir, at least according to Mada. Apparently, he'd been coming to the river for the past three days, wandering around like a lost herdsman.

'The women by the river have started calling him *gurma* because he seems so aimless,' Mada said, laughing. 'But I don't think he's a *gurma*. I think he's looking for a wife. And when I gave him water to drink, I saw how he smiled at me – like he'd been waiting for this his whole life.'

Mada smiled like she'd found a treasure, a gleeful mix of pleasure and excitement. It was a feeling I knew well. She kept going on about this *gurma* of hers, but I couldn't concentrate anymore. The more she spoke, the worse I felt. I didn't want to be reminded of those feelings, the sparks of excitement, the vibrations on my skin and the intoxicating melody in my spirit. Everything I once felt for Usiju.

'I really like him, Auntie Jagila. I want to marry him, and I hope he wants to marry me too.' There was a nervous pause. 'Do you think he will?'

Mada's eyes were back on me, at once uncertain. She didn't need to worry. If there was anybody with favour on their side, it was her. She was a young, beautiful, gentle and hardworking soul, the daughter of a revered cattle owner.

'That man would be a fool to not want to marry you,' I said.

Thunder Fire You

For the rest of the afternoon, Mada and I joined the herdsboys in their search for greener pastures. *Omo*, cows dey chop like king.

With the sun beginning to set, one of the herdsboys told us that we needed to take a shortcut if we wanted to get home before dark. And we did because the dark meant danger. This meant passing through Kyanyker. The black village. Home of the Nkyagus. A stark, desolate place, usually avoided by us Kambus.

Thick, acrid smoke filled the air as we approached Kyanyker, casting it in a perpetual haze. The ground was a patchwork of mud and metal shards, making each step treacherous. Crumbling huts, their thatched roofs riddled with holes, provided scant shelter from the dying light. The ceaseless clanging of hammers against anvils was a haunting symphony, echoing through narrow, winding paths. The smell was of burning coal and sweat, testament to the tireless labour that went on there. Children with soot-streaked faces played amidst the ruins, their laughter jarring with the oppressive mood. This was a place where dreams withered, choked by the demands of survival.

‘Let’s hurry from here. It’s filthy,’ Mada said, covering her nose and hurrying ahead with the herdsboys. They moved through the cows and avoided the touch of a limping Nkyagu, soon reaching the edge of the village.

I strolled behind the cows, observing the blacksmiths at work. Some young men lounging by a ruined hut noticed me and started catcalling, whistling and whooping. I avoided their eyes and hastened towards where Mada and the others stood waiting.

Suddenly I was pulled aside. A speeding wheelbarrow veered by where I’d been, spilling hot coals over the dry earth, its owner apologising: ‘*Ya hakuri! Ya hakuri!*’

I turned to face the one who’d saved me. He stood tall in his chestnut kaftan, with brown skin, a full beard, and long, kinky, neatly braided hair. He looked nothing like the other Nkyagu. He moved closer, his eyes full of concern.

‘Are you okay?’ he asked, his deep voice like a drumbeat.

I nodded, absent-mindedly wondering why such a fine man would be standing in the middle of this filthy village.

He didn’t take his eyes off me. Embarrassed, I glanced down at his

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arms, where a golden-carved wristband gleamed out from under one of his sleeves. This could only mean one thing: he was a nobleman. Before I could speak, one of Alhaji Apagu's herdsboys called out to me from a distance.

'Hajiya Jagila!' He yelled from afar, 'We wan go!'

'Thank you,' I said, looking directly at the man in front of me, 'Alhaji.'

Without waiting for his response I jogged off, catching up with the herdsboys and Mada. Once by their side, I turned around for one last look, but the nobleman was gone.

GAURAV MATAI

Saving Hoppy

Synopsis: Ash, in his late twenties, disillusioned with his job and life, gets into fostering cats. Amidst soulless relationships, waning friendships, and lacking intimacy, he finds himself dangerously close to giving up when he finds Hopscotch, a forty-day-old kitten who contracts a disease that can kill her quicker than he can act. This happens on the day coronavirus threatens the world and total lockdown is announced. If he acts soon and makes new ways where there aren't any, he won't just be able to save Hopscotch, but also himself.

1. When I Found Out

March 24, 2020

This is the end.

It couldn't be happening again. I'd been careful, so careful with her, but fate wasn't going to be bound by my actions. At the crack of dawn, the day had changed. Shrouded in the crackling sun was a wisp of dark cloud, but it wasn't the kind that would rain. It was death itself, lurking within the spirit of life, waiting to prey when hope got weaker.

I didn't want to imagine it, not yet. But with the way my brain chose to flash images without my consent, I saw it. The pain, the vomit puddles, the runny stools, the bloody discharges. I didn't want to let this happen. I didn't want to see another kitten shrink from an unbridled furball of pure energy to a bleak, scrawny skeleton and die. I swallowed the growing queasiness in my throat. *The bloody virus*. My stomach churned like a doomsday prophecy was coming true.

I was standing inside the Cat OPD. In front of me lay Hopscotch, a bright-eyed tabby kitten, barely forty days old, with a small face and dark

black eyes in the centre of olive green irises. On the cold surface of the aluminium examination table, my hand forced the poor feline child down against her will. Doctor Hansraj, the chief veterinarian at Cartman, was working on her puny body like he was fixing the mechanics of a gadget. His assistant Kamlesh joined me in holding her still. I took my hand off her. Face down, pressed hard against the newspaper that covered the table, she hissed or meowed loudly at every unsolicited sensation. Weak, tired and hungry, she was still putting up a fight.

Kamlesh shaved her paw as the vet drew a colourless liquid into the syringe with a needle as long as Hops's foot. She seemed subjected to undue force for a sick kitten that hadn't eaten for two days. *Take it easy, Kamlesh.*

A loud dog bark came from my left, startling both me and Hops. Her eyes widened, her pupils dilated. I could sense her stress. I looked around: the hospital was empty.

Cartman was more of an animal shelter than a hospital. Located in one corner of a park, wedged at the start of a narrow lane, between a petrol pump and a row of small shops. The entrance was a giant metal gate in a tall, barricaded wall with a signboard that said: Keep Door Closed at All Times. A route on the left of the gate led into the park; inside was a vast open space covered with corrugated metallic sheets for roofing held on steel scaffolding bars. On one side were the small office rooms that made it a hospital: the vets' consultation rooms, the sample collection room, and a bigger room with all the test machines. Opposite to that were the Dog and Cat OPDs, with grills for doors you could see through. In the centre was the pathway that led to another large, locked grill door on the other side of the park. Peeping through it, you'd see massive dog cages lined up opposite each other, beyond which, was another giant grill gate blocking out the other open side of the park from the hospital.

I pulled down my face mask and wiped the sweat around my mouth with the sleeve of my cotton t-shirt. I'd forgotten how heavily I was breathing into it. I took a measured breath and put on my mask.

Hopscotch had been one of the best, most well-behaved fosters I'd gotten home. A tiny kitten, a grey furball the size of my palm, she was the breathing replacement for my phone screen – except I'd be more glued to her. She played with my hand, pawed it, scratched it, bit it with a natural

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intuition, not causing real damage. I laughed, wondering how, with her miniature nails and small teeth, she thought she could take me on as her prey.

She often licked my hand, rubbing her coarse tongue against my skin. 'Hooman, you need to have clean hands to touch me,' she would say with her squeaky meows. A human hand means so much for a kitten. It could be a hand that feeds, a hand that loves, or a hand that beats and hurts. It matters whose hand it is and what it does. With delicate yet ferocious small animals, I wielded my power to heal.

To feed, to pet, to play, to socialise, to clean (sometimes): these were the golden pointers of keeping a pet happy – and happy she was. I would cup my palms and make her a couch where she could sit and clean herself thoroughly, licking every corner of her bushy fur with the utmost diligence. Then she would stretch herself and lay languidly on me, expecting to be petted thoroughly. I would give her little scritchies on her head, behind her ear, and under her chin, and she would turn every part of herself towards me like she was trying to get the most out of a massage machine. Her eyes would close tight in pleasure as I did the whole routine each time.

'Kamlesh, hold her still!' The Doctor raised his voice, snapping me back into the OPD. Hopscotch was trying to yank her leg from the assistant's grip, and the Doctor kept missing his mark as he poked her vein with the needle. He'd already made two failed attempts and used cotton gauze to clean up his mess. Hopscotch had been too long this way, and knowing any kitten, she had been the most patient of them all. They should've known better, holding her down for an eternity. I rubbed her chin lightly; she didn't turn it towards me. She held her head still, looking at me with droopy eyes, licking her lips in a dry mouth. No food, no water. *What had happened all of a sudden?*

She would gorge on the food I fed her. I was amazed to see how her little kitten's tummy fit food twice its size. Every morning, she would gobble the contents of the wet food pack that I emptied into her bowl, making sounds of pleasure. I'd give the same again twice more every day, along with dry food in a bowl that she would munch on in-between. So the morning that she stopped eating was very odd. I didn't suspect the worst because she was playing normally, showing good energy levels. I'd taken her for a routine check-up three days before, so the chance that

she had some sort of an illness didn't seem plausible. *Probably just a bad tummy.*

But when I unpacked a new wet food pack into her bowl, and she excitedly ran to sniff it then sharply turned around like it was something forbidden, I would be lying if I said the worst-case scenario didn't cross my mind. Parvovirus – a surprisingly common, highly contagious, rapidly spreading, almost-always-fatal virus that would render any canine or feline defenceless, let alone a forty-day-old unvaccinated kitten. I wasn't pious, but I was praying it didn't turn out to be parvo. I'd seen it before in my previous fosters. It got painful, both for the ones going through it and those caring for them, and it always ended in heartbreak. *The Angel of Death.*

Now, Hopscotch was fighting time. And the times were bad.

I'd reached the hospital in the dreary midst of an apocalyptic atmosphere, sceptical whether I'd be able to come again. I hoped that I didn't need to. But fate was turning tides like an oncoming tsunami. The troubled air made its presence felt, swaying and swirling, unhinged in the searing summer, creating an ominous whistling sound, like a serial killer out to satiate his need. There wasn't just the Angel but also the Devil of Death in the air. They were calling it 'novel coronavirus,' or corona.

Over a couple of months, corona snowballed from a few cases of flu in China into something more serious. People were reported dying. It spread to other countries from the gullible immune systems of travellers moving across countries. After China came Italy, then France, Germany, Spain, Russia, and all other countries started falling like dominoes in front of the Devil. The Devil didn't need a visa or stop at immigration. First the cases were reported each day, then over weeks, the numbers of infected spiralling out of control quicker than the governments could act. Soon, global death tolls were across all media, on TV and social media, and we were tracking them like the scores of sports games.

When cases began emerging in India, a lot of the corporates moved to work from home to save on their medical reimbursement costs and protect their legal asses. Soon, almost overnight, the PM's announcement plunged the country into a strict twenty-one-day lockdown. Who knew strict would be this strict? Offices closed, public spaces closed, transport shut down, and shops, restaurants, pubs, and clubs all had their doors

locked and shutters up. Overnight. No food supply, no emergency services – nothing.

DON'T STEP OUT.

WEAR A MASK.

WASH YOUR HANDS FOR 20 SECONDS EACH TIME.

This was the guide for surviving the lockdown. I didn't follow the first step. If I had, Hopscotch wouldn't be alive.

Jaan hai toh jahaan hai,' the PM's clip was replaying all over TV and social media, repeated by broadcasters, influencers, doctors and practically everyone else. It said, 'If you have life, you have the world.'

December, 2017

I was dying. Corporate life was killing me. Life is a slow death, they say. But if you work in a corporate, you get priority boarding. Sitting on the twenty-sixth floor of a high-rise in the city's business district, all there was to do was sit at my desk and stare at my computer screen. *Numbers! Targets!* I was a horse with blinders on in the form of my cubicle walls, running an imaginary race where there was no first place. We would talk about the wealth inequality in Venezuela and corruption in the States and come back to our desks making one-tenth of those whose orders we followed, while working ten times harder. *Just go for a smoke, man.*

'Ash! Meeting!' screamed my co-worker from a distance.

'Fuck them,' I said, well aware that it was in my head.

'Be right there,' I actually said.

'Ash,' a senior colleague said as I entered the big meeting room. 'You're here, finally. Let's get it started then.'

I sat by the round table in a room with grey-and-maroon-carpeted walls. The lights were dim, and I couldn't see everyone else in the room. The projector's illumination on the wall was the primary light source, followed by dim lights from the laptop and phone screens. I put my hand in my pocket and flipped the switch on my phone to silence it. The slides kept changing and images flashed away into oblivion. The one presenting was the only one talking; others were sharing memes, sleeping with their

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eyes open, or ordering lunch. It was nothing different, ever. *Corporate fucking life.*

I left the meeting nearly two hours later, and none of us knew what had to be done. There was cagey laughter, meaningless gossip, and evening tea plans. I still wasn't sure why I had been called in. Two hours of my time, unexplained, and then I'd have someone else running up to me asking why I haven't done the deck yet or sent the files across.

'What was the meeting about?' Ridhimmma asked, taking a seat next to my desk.

'God knows,' I said, flaring my nostrils as I breathed.

'Are you going to the thing tonight by the way?'

'What thing?'

'Vaani is speaking at this leadership thing tonight. Free buffet and drinks,' Ridhimmma said, her lips curving at the corners after saying the word 'drinks.' 'Do you want to go?' she prodded.

'Fuck no.'

'It's in ITC. Fancy!'

'That's the problem. It's too fancy.'

'Okay, Mr. Dalai Lama. Sit at home and watch Netflix.'

'I'm probably going to go to Ishaan's and play with his cats.'

'Cats don't give a fuck about people.'

'If you look around closely in this office, you'll see that even people don't give a fuck about people.'

'Do you give a fuck about a smoke though?'

'Let's go.'

That evening, my boss, Vaani, asked me to stay late. When I asked her about it, her response was vague. I decided to wait, watching the sunset from the high-rise window. An hour later Vaani called me to her cabin.

'Ash, you're a smart guy. I think you will understand.'

'Understand what?'

'The plan has been scrapped. Th -'

'The what?'

'The plan. Agrandir Textiles. They want something new.'

'But ma'am, you're aware that their company has no assets or policies that can streamline their efficiency. They haven't even paid their workforce

for three months.'

Vaani was busy typing furiously on her latest edition, rose-gold MacBook Air. I wondered how her lavishly painted, extended nails didn't get in the way or begin to crack. Anyway, she wasn't listening to me.

'Just leave it for now. We'll start on a new plan tomorrow.'

I felt like I was listening to a pre-recorded IVR on the phone; there was no room for negotiation or empathy.

She got back to typing into her laptop without waiting for my response, so I assumed she wasn't looking for one. She noticed me still in the room.

'Sorry, I was just leaving,' I said as I stood up.

'No, no, wait. What are you doing later?'

'Just about to go home,' I said.

'Okay, I'm giving a talk at ITC tonight. Come along. I'll introduce you to some people. Is that okay?'

'Sure that sounds great,' I said, knowing that another evening had just been sucked out of me by corporate masturbation.

'Nine o'clock. See you there.'

I went back to my desk and texted Ishaan that I had to cancel tonight. He wasn't surprised, but he was concerned for me. I had been working too hard, and I needed some time off.

Once Vaani's talk was over at the event, she rubbed shoulders with old, irrelevant, wealthy people in suits, also referred to as senior industry leaders. Wearing a black formal blazer and skirt, with a slender champagne glass in her hand, she feigned excitement and laughed unnaturally loud. I had barely seen her smile in office.

She came over to me a few minutes later. I was slumped on a chair with a drink in my hand, looking at my phone.

'I'm so glad you came,' she said.

'My pleasure. That was a great speech.'

'Nothing much, just investor talk. Anyway, I had to speak to you about something.'

I sensed my heart pulsating.

'I'm moving. Leaving Ventura, going to Barton's.'

Both were topmost firms with millionaire clientele. Barton's had edged Ventura over the last few years and become a much bigger brand. More importantly, they hated each other.

Saving Hoppy

‘Oh, uh, congratulations!’ I said, trying to cover up my initial shock.

‘Do you want to join me?’

‘I ... can I think about it?’

Then she gave me the business pitch. More like a deal with the Devil. More money, bigger clients, better position. What she left out was ‘more time working.’ Would I shake hands with the Devil? Would I sell out, just to be a cog in a bigger wheel? Maybe. But she gave me time to decide, vanishing like a dark soul floating into darkness. Something she had said was left ringing in my ear.

‘You want to be successful, don’t you?’

Don’t I?

From one box to a bigger box to another box. That was the life. It may sound dull, but it was as taxing as any extreme sport. You had to let your ego get bruised and battered, have your body and mind go through the most incredible transformations, turning you from someone original and free-flowing into, well, a box. An empty box. Pieces that would fit in the giant orchestration of systems and processes without cause or effect, without meaning or consequence – just a part, a tool, like the other million or so who were committed to making others richer. Vaani’s offer wasn’t for a job: it was for a part, the role of someone climbing the ranks, becoming successful, feeling a sense of importance as the really vital people, already cast and set in stone, made their million bucks a year. Grease my palm a little, too, yes? Sitting at my desk the next day, I gave it a long hard think, and thought what anyone else in my position would: *leave all these miserable suckers behind!*

AVA McKEVITT

The Book of Ide

1.

At a particular point in the twirling death dance of time, something moved in the Devil's Glen. More specifically, someone entered it.

Flinging herself desperately past the trees and through the undergrowth in search of water or food, the intruder entered the Devil's Glen through sheer folly. The forest watched with greed as the gorse attempted to cling to her grey, woollen tunic. The garment tore at the hem around her knees, turning swiftly into a rag. The girl cried out, whipped her head over her shoulder, scanned the forest behind her, then moved again.

Not seeing where she put her feet, she tripped over a fallen log and fell over a small cliff that lay beyond, concealed by gorse. Yet another cry as her arms flailed out. Crashing through crowns of trees below, she gave a shrill scream and toppled into what had remained undisturbed by mortals since the world's creation. Breaking branches on her descent, her face was scratched, the surface of her bare arms and legs sliced. She landed with a thud on her front.

The girl lay still for a while, her eyes shut and limbs sprawled. The noise which burst from her lips fell somewhere between annoyance and pain. Gradually, she found the strength to slowly push herself onto her back. She peeled her head off the ground and pulled up to a seated position, lingering there for a few moments and holding a hand to her head. She cursed herself silently. Then, finally, she looked around.

The grove was a bright, dappled clearing lined with scrutinising trees of various kinds that gave shelter to the cowering grass below, protected by a thick wall of sprawling gorse which bristled in the wind at the very notion that it had failed to keep her out. The only part of the glen that seemed happy to see her was a young waterfall that gushed with excitement from

rocks on the far side of the glen, pushing through the pebbles into the undergrowth, no doubt forming a small stream on the other side of the thicket.

Putting one hand on the ground, the girl attempted to stand. Her ankles shook, and her knees buckled. A whimper escaped her lips as the grass held its grip on the soles of her feet, keeping her grounded. Tears slipped down her cheeks. She sniffled before furiously wiping her eyes with the back of her left wrist. With an audible gulp, she looked again at the waterfall.

The grove watched with amused curiosity as the trespasser refused to be undone, rising and hobbling on unsteady legs over to the small waterfall. She collapsed against the rocks, falling forward as she leaned down to drink. Her nose plunged into the water, and she opened her mouth, holding it there as her insides coated with cold purity.

Once her face was numb, and she felt she could drink no more without throwing it all up, the girl pushed herself up on her forearms and sat back against the smooth rock. She slowly lifted an arm and reached within the armhole of her tunic, feeling around the inner fabric at the waistline and giving a sharp tug. She revealed to the grove a small leather pouch. Unravelling the rope that held it sealed, she upturned the bag into her cupped hand. Five red berries dropped out, circling the grooves of her skin before settling in the centre of her palm.

She remembered standing on the stone beach of Inis Faithlinn. The sun had been splitting the rocks on the roiling silver shore with its bright rays, the green crowns of all the sacred trees behind the settlement waving in the wind, as if to bid her their own fond farewell.

Out from the woodlands behind the huts trudged an old man, bald, grey-bearded, dressed in a woollen brown cloak, and hunched over a large, thick staff fashioned from oak. 'It's rather rude to keep the world waiting, Ide.'

'Before I go, Mug Ruith, I wanted to ask ...' Her throat was blocked.

'Why are you so afraid?' His brown eyes held a warm golden gleam in the sunlight.

She smiled, albeit shakily. 'Yes. Why am I so afraid, Mug Ruith?'

He glanced at the sea beyond her. 'There is little more terrifying than this, but all druids must spread their knowledge. They must venture

beyond their first grove, find a king to advise, and guide his subjects. Otherwise, what is the point of knowing anything? Besides, if I told you to stay, would you?’

A shared glint of amusement and respect passed between them.

He reached within the folds of his cloak. He pulled out a small leather pouch and handed it to her.

Ide took the pouch, released the small cord which held it together, and peered inside to see five red berries. Then, with wide eyes, she looked past her master to the tree by the beach in front of the line of huts. It had a short trunk but boasted a broad crown, bright green foliage, and deep red berries. This rowan tree looked out over the bay, watching for invaders and letting its branches be picked at for the druids’ sacred purposes. Now, it watched her in turn. The rowan had been her first lesson on Inis Faithlinn. Mug Ruith had called it the tree of death.

‘With one berry, one shall probably feel nothing. But this is the trap of the rowan: not only does it seem inviting, but when nothing happens after the first bite, the foolish traveller assumes it is safe. After the second berry, one shall feel indigestion and other physical ailments. The hungry wanderer continues to feast, uncertain of when he will find other food. After three, one may suffer hallucinations but think it is a symptom of starvation. With four, Donn is readying his house of spirits to receive a new soul. So, never have five.’

‘Why would you give me this?’ Her voice was small.

Mug Ruith shrugged. ‘My master did the same for me when I left him. It may help.’

Unexpectedly, Ide found herself smiling. Of course, Mug Ruith would perform this one final frustration. Suddenly, the pouch in her hand was a comfort. She would sew a pocket into the waistline of her tunic later to hide it.

‘I am sure you will do yourself proud.’ Those were his final words to her.

Since then, Ide had experienced nothing but shame, ruin, and hopelessness. On her travels, she had been utterly fruitless in her endeavours to find a king and a home. Now, she was lost, exhausted, hungry, and weak.

Even if she lasted another day on the water from this grove, how could she find her way to safety in such a state? If she could not even see after

herself, what wisdom could she claim to have which could help others? No, she could not go on.

Blinking back stinging tears and whispering a prayer into the aether, she decided to be grateful for all she had been given so far. She brought all the berries to her mouth and swallowed them. Her head lowered against her knees, and her shoulders briefly shook. Then, she sat back against the rock by the waterfall, rested her head, closed her eyes, and awaited oblivion. She tried to imagine the paradise that awaited her.

Meanwhile, the glen watched patiently, knowing that all mortal creatures perished here. But as the sun set and the girl's breath never ceased, the wind worriedly tickled the tops of the trees.

When Ide next opened her eyes, she was no longer alone.

An indigo evening had fallen over the Red Mountains, the green clearing cloaked in shadows. An orange glow seeped into the black air from a small fire encircled by stones. The waterfall tried to sing along to a crackling of flames.

Ide awoke to the sound of a great snap of twigs and dry leaves on the open flame. Pulled out of sleep with a frigid wind against her face, she froze and thought quickly, *Is this the Otherworld?* No, she realised, looking around. This was still the mortal realm. Mug Ruith's rowan berries had not worked. Unfortunately, she had little time to process her confusion.

She searched through the dim light and saw the figure of a man huddled before the fire, wrapped in a brown cloak, his back to her. Her heart began to beat faster. She was clearly defenceless, so why had he not already killed her? In reverse, she did not know what weapons he had either. So, she stood, tightly holding on to her pouch as if ready to strike him with it, careful not to make a sound, hoping to silently slip away.

'Druids should know not to get lost in the wild,' the stranger said. His voice scraped against his throat like a knife's edge on a rock. 'How can one so learned be such a fool?'

Ide froze and wondered if she should ignore him, bolt, and hope he could not catch her. She thought again. *I don't know.*

He chuckled and glanced over his shoulder at her, exposing his face. Ide was presented with a long, narrow, wrinkled face lined with a dark beard, out of which bored brown eyes. Dark, matted hair poked out from underneath the brown hood.

Almost immediately, her stomach dropped. She had been raised with druids, who customarily wore brown. But his cloak was merely stained and shadowed. She could make out the red hues in the flickering firelight. Few wanderers wore red.

Mug Ruith's voice echoed in her head, 'The two colours of the Shee: green and red. Did you expect some deeper meaning? The Shee are not complicated, Ide. Unpredictable but simple. Groups wear green; the loners red. I cannot tell you why; that you must discern on your own, but I pray that you never meet a Shee in red who travels alone.'

She recalled a lesson concerning one of these solitary Shee: the Fear Dearg. He roamed the wilderness, cursing travellers who did not welcome him to their hearths and blessing those who took a chance. From the moment they crossed paths with the Fear Dearg, they were forever changed, for better or worse.

'Who are you?' Her voice was hoarse with terror.

The red man smiled crookedly. 'If I ever had a name, it is useless to me now, certainly to you. Join me. I have food and drink to share.' He gestured to his wild hearth with a thin, frail hand, beckoning her over.

She suspected the red man was a figment of her imagination, a hallucination from the rowan berries which, despite not killing her, still had muddled her mind. However, if he was one of those otherworldly beings, one of the Shee, she dared not refuse, not that she could imagine how much worse her lot could become if he were to curse her. Nevertheless, the thought of food and drink made her mouth water. Besides, what did she have to lose?

Ide approached warily and sat an arm's length away from him by the fire.

'What do you call yourself?' The red man turned to a leather bag at his side.

As she had been refused his name, the request felt unfair. But she thought better of pointing this out, especially when he pulled a cooked mutton joint from his satchel and held it in his grip over the fire to warm.

'Ide,' she croaked, seeing that the flames did not bother him.

He also pulled out a leather flask with his free hand, opened it with his teeth, and drank. 'Just Ide?'

'Ni Gharraine.' Her mouth watered at the sight.

He finished and wiped his bottom lip with his wrist, holding the flask out to her. 'The daughter of which grove?'

'Inis Faithlinn,' she answered before biting her tongue. Was it wise to tell him such things? She was not one to lie, and trying to deceive a Shee would be terrible. She took the flask from him, careful not to touch his fingers.

'Ah, yes. It is said the knowledge of Mug Ruith is not of this world, that he prays to the gods daily and communes with the Shee at each full moon.'

Ide raised his flask to her mouth. From his speech, he seemed to wish her to think he was not one of those Otherworldly beings. She wondered why he would attempt to hide it. Perhaps he was a hallucination, so she had nothing to fear if she was impertinent. 'Half-moons, too, if necessary.'

Hearing him chuckle, she took a large gulp from the flask. The tepid sweetness of mead coated her throat. Resisting the urge to drink it all, she politely returned it to him, noticing that his other hand, which still held the mutton, seemed unbothered by the flames.

'Do the Shee talk to you, druid girl?'

She flushed. 'They might do. Whether or not I understand them is another matter.'

He threw his head back, howling, 'Now, you sound like a real druid!'

At the sound of his laughter, she decided he was human.

Once the mutton had been warmed, they feasted on it, passing the joint between each other and taking bites out of the flesh. It tasted better than any she had ever had before.

'Were you diverted from the Great Road?'

She nodded. 'Yes, sir. Bandits stole my horse and supplies. They only spared my life when I told them I was a druid, not wishing to invite the wrath of the Shee. But they still threatened to rape me, so I fled.'

'All that knowledge, yet you did not think to let them discover your secret stash?' He gestured to the remains of the Mug Ruith's leather pouch in her fist. 'They would have fought among each other for those berries, some for hunger, others to harness its magical properties. Once they were distracted, you could have reclaimed your horse and rode away.'

She scowled and clenched her jaw. He must have found traces of the berries on the leather or her lips. But only Mug Ruith could tell her how

to act. This man could not be a Shee, she had decided. He was far too rude, too imperfect, too human.

‘Were there no kings in the southern lands of Mumu who needed your help?’

‘None,’ she conceded bitterly. ‘But I will exhaust each kingdom and clan.’

‘There is always Connaught to the west.’

A shiver went down Ide’s spine. She laughed nervously, thinking it a jest. ‘Even if by some miracle the Shee allowed me to trespass on their lands, what use would they have for me? A druid’s purpose is to bridge their world and ours. Besides, it does not do for a mortal soul to enter the Otherworld.’ A silly thought came to her, which she voiced with a giggle: ‘Why, is that where you are going?’

Silence. The red man turned his attention back to the flames.

Her laughter died. ‘Sir, as a druid, I must advise you that it would be sheer folly, not to mention the height of disrespect, to impose yourself on the Shee should they not wish for you to enter.’

He chuckled, a habit which was starting to infuriate her. ‘Yes, but just imagine the looks on their faces.’

Ide was speechless for the first time. She hated the sensation.

‘You ought to be more concerned with yourself,’ he continued. ‘I could point you back towards the Great Road.’

Pulled back to her own situation, she looked at him wide-eyed. ‘You would?’

‘I said I could. Do you need my help?’

Mug Ruith whispered in Ide’s ear, ‘As long as a druid has a mind and the great world, nothing more is required.’ She wished his wisdom had come to her before she took the berries. But now they had not worked, and his voice seemed fainter. That also worried her.

‘I don’t know,’ she replied quietly.

A small smile slithered across the red man’s face. He pointed to the waterfall behind her. ‘Follow the water downstream, and you will find your path again.’

It was a kindness she had not expected. She did not know what to think of him now, yet she would continue her journey. But his grin made her wonder whether she should be grateful or not. She chose her following

The Book of Ide

words carefully, her heart beating fast. 'Why are you helping me? I have nothing to give you in return. How can I repay you?'

The glen grew still, knowing all the possible answers he could give.

'Just follow the fall,' he said.

Maybe he was indeed a Shee, Ide wondered, for he made no sense to her.

As moonlight soon seeped through the treetops, Ide was relieved when he lifted his knees to his chin, rested his head, and started snoring. She also could not resist curling up on the grass and closing her eyes. Her only comfort now was the chance to glimpse the Otherworld in her dreams. Unfortunately, no such sights came to her that night.

When the sun rose, its bright light piercing through the treetops so that the glen glowed green again, interrupting Ide's slumber, she found herself alone, the red man and his belongings vanished. The hearth had long been extinguished, and the stones scattered as if they had never been.

The lonesomeness and still silence made her skin crawl. It made her wonder if the meeting had been real at all. Had the red man been mortal, a mere hallucination, or a visit from the Shee?

Mug Ruith hummed in her head, 'Why not all three?'

CAIT OWEN

The Paint in Their Eyes

Synopsis: starting in late 1993, this novel follows Wren Sterling, ex-art student turned painter-decorator, as she tackles the upcoming demolition of her home, which stands in the planned path of a new motorway. She joins the local community's efforts to prevent this destruction, finding more than just solidarity in the protests.

1. Back Bedroom Studio for Rent

It was at the front door to Wren's local boozier, The Duchess, at the top of a ladder where she heard the first bang and crash from down the road. Wren and Steve had finished decorating the inside and moved onto its red brick and navy exterior for Flora's wedding party. In her usual dungarees, covered in flecks of paint from the painter-decorator jobs she did to pay rent, Wren was no stranger to climbing ladders. But the shock from the crash caused her to lose her balance and the white bunting she'd been preparing to hang over the doorway fluttered to the ground.

She took a breath as her hands found the top of the ladder, steadying herself.

'What the fuck was that?' Steve asked, looking up at Wren with wide eyes from where he was holding the bottom of the ladder. He was only thirty-three, yet future wrinkles seemed to surface as his eyebrows arched on his forehead, matching speckled spikes of short ginger hair.

'It can't be,' Wren muttered. She'd been at the pub the night before for Flora's hen night drinks. There were whispers at the bar that the people at No 204 had been evicted that morning. She hadn't believed it and shared a knowing look with Steve across the bar as he'd poured her a pint. So many stories within the walls of The Duchess, with its polished wooden

bar and red paisley-patterned carpets, turned out to be a bit of tattle that needed to be seen to be believed.

The residents of the area had, of course, heard whispers of this topic before now. Wren and Flora had received an official letter through their letterbox nearly a year before, informing them of the plan for their house to be demolished so that a new motorway could be built. It turned out everyone on their side of Lester Road had received one too. Denial was on everyone's lips. Why a new motorway? That was what the tube was for. Luckily, The Duchess was safe on the other side of the road, but anxiety grew as more letters arrived detailing the scheme.

Wren climbed down from the ladder and Steve quickly locked the front door of the pub. It was only eight am but there was always the risk of a robbery, especially when a free pint was on the cards.

They ran across the road and down the pavement of Lester Road, away from the pub. The crashes continued and Wren could hear thuds of something being hit repeatedly. They passed the rows of terraced houses, some with their doors open. Wren spotted a few of her neighbours in dressing gowns, probably awoken by the noise. Others stood on their doorsteps in workwear, holding cups of tea or coffee. Wren could hear snippets of the news playing on radios from the opened doors and windows. But it wasn't the national news she was interested in. Her destination was 204 Lester Road.

Wren and Steve found a small crowd forming on the pavement outside the house, some people spilling onto the road. There was dust in the air. The banging continued. Wren looked up, following the eyeline of the crowd, and saw empty space where there had once been a roof identical to the one on her own house, some tiles missing or cracked. The roof had been waiting for a renovation it would never receive.

The demolition team in hard hats were walking in and out of the house, throwing rubble into a big yellow skip. They took no notice of the crowd watching them at work, some shooting dirty looks. It was probably a usual thing when your job required tearing down perfectly good housing.

Wren could see the red brick foundations as the walls crumbled, and soon she could see the house's interior. There was a bedroom wall of turquoise, still intact – but not for long. Wren gasped as she recalled painting that wall; it had been one of her first decorating jobs in Leytonstone. She still

had a swatch of the paint in the pad she carried around with her during jobs to sample shades before application. Malachite was written next to it in pencil. She hadn't stepped foot in that house since. But now, six years later, she could only watch as one of her imprints on the community was ripped away.

Wren began to cough as dust entered her airways and Steve shot her a glance, the skin between his eyebrows stitched together in concern.

They watched as the men called instructions to each other and the skip continued to fill with rubble. All Wren could focus on was how easily the house was being taken down. The walls once seemed so firm, but with just a swing of a hammer, they became debris.

Wren stared transfixed. It was clear that everyone around her was coming to the same realisation: house by house, the whole row would be torn down. Wren thought of how she'd tell Flora.

Straightening up, she turned to Steve. 'I have to make sure Flora's awake.'

'Of course, mate,' he said, a shake in his voice. 'It's not every day she'll get married.'

Wren squeezed his shoulder and peeled her feet from their spot to jog home.

She reached No 32, unlocked the front door and found Flora in the kitchen, mug in hand. She was still in one of Isaac's t-shirts and a pair of red plaid pyjama bottoms. Her hair had been freshly done the day before. She'd spent hours sat at her auntie's house in Camden while Wren waited patiently to see what she'd chosen for her wedding day. She'd gone for braids of a copper shade. This brought Wren back to when they'd met on their first day of art school, aged nineteen, across the Thames nearly ten years ago, when both of them had big dreams of finding success in the world of art.

'Don't worry, I'm awake. Just got up actually. I thought I'd sleep in later after the night we had at the pub, but I must have some bridal luck or something – don't even have a headache.' Flora was rambling. She always did when there was a big day ahead. And this was arguably the biggest day she'd ever had, though Wren disagreed. She was happy for her, but that didn't mean she was happy with her moving out of the house they'd lived in for the last six years. It wasn't her fault she'd met Isaac, but Wren did

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slightly resent her for accepting his ring when he proposed to her last year. Wren knew she'd lost her best friend a few years before. She'd repeatedly caught her laughing hysterically about the jokes he made and he soon became the sole source of her anecdotes over their morning cups of tea.

She looked around the kitchen. Half of the postcards from art gallery gift shops, blue-tacked to coral walls, would soon be gone. They'd agreed Flora would take custody of her favourites in the tenant divorce.

Soon Wren would be paying the full rent. It was cheap, but with the unpredictable wages of a painter-decorator, that was still a loss. She'd need to figure something out soon. Rent had been the ongoing worry. Now there was another: her home.

Wren reached out to take Flora's hand. 'I have to tell you something.'

'Alright.' Suddenly she tensed. 'Don't tell me you're confessing your undying love for me, because there'll be a moment for that during the ceremony.' She attempted a laugh but then saw the seriousness in Wren's eyes. 'Wait, what's wrong?'

Wren looked into Flora's wide eyes. She considered telling her. She wanted to confide her worries to her best friend, but something in her told her not to. It was Flora's day and she shouldn't start it with something so taxing.

'No, it's fine,' Wren said, considering her words carefully, 'I'm just gonna miss you so much.'

As if on cue, another thud and crash of glass was heard in the distance. Flora jumped. The timing was almost comedic. Just as the houses to the left of them were beginning to fall, so was the household they'd created. All at once, Wren was annoyed at how long it took to walk down their road of over two hundred houses to the tube, but was also relieved at their placement at No 32.

'What was that?' Flora asked.

'Just another building site,' Wren said quickly, looking around the kitchen and imagining it reduced to rubble.

'Whereabouts?' Flora asked, clearly noticing Wren's shell shock.

'At the other end of the street. Near the offy.' At least that wasn't a lie.

Flora clearly noticed the worry in Wren's eyes, as she drew her into a hug. 'Aw, Wren, it'll be okay.'

Wren was glad Flora had moved on from the sounds of demolition

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continuing in the background. She took this opportunity to voice the worries she'd been suppressing before they were added to. 'But it won't be *our* house anymore, will it? You're moving as soon as you come back from your honeymoon.'

'I'll still be around.'

That was true. Flora worked as a primary school teacher just over the other side of the tube station. But she was moving to Ealing in West London. Twenty-three stops on the Central Line. Wren would travel there for Flora, but it would be hard to adjust from only having to walk a few steps to making an hour-long commute. 'I wish you weren't moving so far.'

Flora sighed. 'Me too.'

They stayed wrapped in each other's arms for a few moments more.

There was a knock at the door. Flora untangled herself from the hug and went to answer it.

'Happy wedding day!' Steve's voice came from the hall, followed by Flora's laughter.

Wren entered the hall to find Steve and Flora wrapped in a big hug as he lifted her feet off the ground.

Wren caught Steve's eye as he put Flora down. He widened them questioningly.

She shook her head.

He lowered his head in resolution, then turned to Flora. 'Excited?' he asked, clutching her arms on either side, once again the pub landlord, ready to entertain with a grin.

'Yes!' she exclaimed. 'I'm feeling so jittery though. I shouldn't have had a coffee without something to eat first.'

Wren stepped back into the kitchen and grabbed a loaf of bread. 'Think fast!' she called and threw it at her.

Flora caught it easily, very used to her six-year-old students trying the same trick on her. She laughed. 'Cheers. Any butter?'

Wren opened the fridge. It was almost empty. Only a pint of milk and a block of cheese. She'd need to go to the shop in these next few days after the wedding. 'Sorry, mate.'

Flora shrugged and took a pre-cut slice from the loaf. 'Are you gonna be able to afford a shop for the week? You haven't had a decorating job.'

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'I'll figure something out.'

'You can always raid my fridge,' Steve offered, and Flora gently squeezed his arm.

'Cheers. My concern is more with paying the rent next month.'

'You could get another housemate,' Flora suggested.

Wren and Steve shared a look. It was unlikely someone would want to move into a house on its way to demolition.

'Nah, I think I'd like my own space.'

'Beggars can't be choosers,' Flora chuckled, then her eyes grew wide with an idea. 'Why don't you rent the room out for something else? If you don't want a housemate, why don't you offer it as an art studio?'

'And why would anyone want to have a studio in a house?' Wren asked.

'I heard the Addison studios round the corner just upped rent by a tenner. I bet there'll be someone with all their canvases and paints who needs a place to put it all.'

Steve nodded. 'Yeah, I've heard from a few punters they can't afford it. Sooner or later the powers that be will make it so we can't even afford the rent for our own houses. It's lucky my dad bought the pub when I was just a tot.'

Wren considered this. Flora had a point. She always did. That was the annoying thing about her.

She asked Steve, 'If I made an ad for the room, would you be able to put it up on the board? And point it out if you overhear anyone who might be interested?'

'Of course, mate.'

Wren rushed into the living room, with its olive-green walls and framed photographs Flora had developed for her degree show. They would also be gone soon. One of them was a black-and-white shot of Wren at twenty with her hair buzzed.

Wren sat on the battered sofa and reached for a pen along with a plain piece of A4 paper from her paint swatch pad.

'You're gonna make an ad now?' Flora asked, following Wren into the room and sitting down beside her.

'Might as well. You need to eat before you get ready,' Wren replied, gesturing at the bread in Flora's hand before applying a tone of faux self-pity. 'And you are leaving me. Need to fill the room as quickly as possible.'

'Ha, ha.' Flora smiled sympathetically and reached out to touch Wren's shoulder.

Wren shook her off, placed the paper on the coffee table, and began to draw. First she drew the outline of a house, but not the type you'd imagine a kid to draw – this was their house, including the indents of the eroding bricks, the sloping roof, and even the chimney at the top right, with some smoke in biro for added effect. Once the outline was finished, she wrote 'BACK BEDROOM STUDIO FOR RENT' in the centre, and was relieved to find that all five words fit into the lovingly drawn outline.

She leant back against the cushion behind her to admire the sketch.

'Looks good,' Flora said. 'Any fine print?'

'Didn't think about that,' Wren replied, then leant forward again. In smaller handwriting beneath the outline she wrote that the room would be available in a couple weeks at the end of September and the rent would be up for discussion.

Flora read it, smiled and gave her a nod. 'Maybe, until you find someone, you'll actually get some painting of your own done in there.'

Wren shrugged this suggestion off. It wasn't her own art she wanted out of this. She'd made that decision years before. She would be the observer of artists but never the artist she'd planned to be, the artist her tutors had wanted, whose work was exhibited in the galleries on the other side of the river, where other past students of Chelsea School of Art had made them so proud.

The paint brushes she used to paint the walls of rooms and house fronts had a safety that the paint brush against canvas didn't. Walls needed to be covered whereas a canvas revealed what was hidden. She no longer wanted to reveal her artistic instincts.

Wren looked towards the drawn poster on the coffee table and felt a fizzing in her mind. Instead of searching further for it, she picked the poster up and stood, handing it to Steve, who was stood in the doorway.

'Pleasure doing business with you,' she said, laughing before turning to Flora. 'Come on mate, we need to get you dressed and ready. Isaac will be waiting to you to walk down the aisle in two hours.'

'There isn't going to be an aisle,' Flora corrected, 'We're going to the town hall.'

'Aisle, corridor – no difference. As long as you're walking down it, we

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need to get you ready.'

Wren ushered Flora up the stairs. Once she was up, Wren turned back to Steve.

'See you later, Steve!' Flora called down from the landing. 'Remember to wear a suit!'

'I will! I think I have one nestled away somewhere,' he responded with a chuckle as Flora's bedroom door slammed behind her. His face fell slightly when he met Wren's gaze.

'You didn't tell her,' he whispered.

'I didn't want to ruin her day.'

He nodded in agreement. 'I was worried I would come here and find you both in dire moods.'

'Not this time, mate.'

'Alright. See you at the pub later,' he said, opening the door to walk down the front path. As he reached the front gate, he called back, 'Remember to tame that mop of yours!'

Wren stuck out her tongue at him before closing the door. She reached her hands up to flatten her dark brown waves falling in uneven layers to her chin. She hadn't bothered touching them when she rolled out of bed, but could now feel several pieces pointing up in different directions. She'd need to find a brush. A simple problem to fix.

She heard another thud from down the road. Telling Flora about the demolition would make it too real. She'd deal with it later. But facing reality couldn't be postponed for too long.

SOFIA SOUSA

Icarus's Fall

1.

I'm falling, where to is a mystery. The wings attached to my arms and back are now nothing but bits of feathers and melted wax burning my skin as I fall. I'm just a dot of nothingness in the infinite blue sky. The cold wind brings tears to my eyes as the clouds swallow me whole, the unbearable sunlight blinds me.

Then everything stops; a warm light holds me tightly. I feel boneless, weightless. I must be dead. There is no way that I'm alive. I start panicking, I'm not entirely sure if my heart is beating too fast, or not at all. It's so bright and warm, like the Sun itself is holding me in its arms, the wind around me whispers soothing songs of comfort, trading the subsiding panic for an undisturbed feeling of easiness; I'm floating, and there is no other place on Earth where I'd rather be. Amid the dying comfort, I close my eyes and let the light carry me.

When I open my eyes again, I'm alive. But am I, really? Nothing seems real. I don't know how this could be, but the truth is that I woke up to an extremely bright light, pieces of glass and gold floating and shimmering everywhere. My back is burning so much that I wonder if it is on fire – I think that's what grounds me, the pain, something the dead can't feel. With a scream, I roll over to flap at what I assume is a roaring flame, but all I find are rough holes of burned skin and feathers clinging to the melted wax that still covers my back.

After I calm down enough to be aware of anything, I look around to understand my bearings. No ceiling, no walls – just sky and the stone-cold floor where I lay. The platform has only one marble wall with a golden door, and for a moment I wonder if this is some kind of sick cell where I can choose to plunge to my death, which would be dumb, since I have

just been saved from exactly that, or wait for whatever is to come. Time goes by, whether minutes or hours I can't tell; the sun doesn't seem to move with the passage of time as usual. I wonder if I will be left here to rot forever.

At the sound of a door opening and closing, my head jerks towards its direction and I focus my attention on the door, stilling only when I catch sight of something – no – *someone*, standing, glowing. The figure starts walking in my direction, their walk imposing, and when they get close enough for me to look into their eyes, my breath gets caught in my throat.

They halt before me, and I feel as small as an ant. Tall, glowing, light-brown skin and those eyes ... those golden blazing eyes are not human. All that glowing ... it is a God. I have a God in front of me and I am alive, but am I, really? I can't take my eyes off of him – I feel like he can burn me with just a gaze if he wants to – and he probably can.

'You're Apollo, the Sun God ...' I blurt. 'I'm dead, I have to be.'

I'm sure that I am going crazy at this point. I don't know where to look. You're not supposed to look at a God; you're supposed to turn into ashes if you do. But here I am, alive, looking straight into Apollo's furious golden eyes. The whole thing feels ridiculous.

'I have to get out of here, there has to be a way out of here. Or maybe I'm asleep and this is just a dream –'

'Calm down your melted wings, Human. If it weren't for me, you would *indeed* be dead. Yet, here you are, alive with a burned back.' His light blond hair falls across his tanned skin as he rounds me as if I'm a caged animal. 'But don't you dare to think that you're free just because I saved you from your death, that you can leave this place whenever you want or even do what you want, no.'

He crouches before me, leaning over me, his fierce eyes looking at me menacingly. 'You will not leave this palace, ever. You shall stay here till the end of your days, serving me and learning what happens to those who dare to enter my realm without my consent. From now on, you are *mine*.'

My brain is in knots, and I'm not sure I fully understand what is happening. Apollo, the Sun God, saved me from my death just to leave me rotting in a strangely glamorous cell with no walls, smelling like burned meat, just because I flew too high? All because I wanted to feel a bit of warmth on my cold skin before following my father out of the nightmare

that was King Minos' castle.

From being trapped in one place to another; how much better can life get?

'So ... you're saying that I'm stuck here forever.' I repeat the God's words to myself, trying to make sense of what's happening now that it's evident that I'm alive. From where the walls should be, I can only see blue sky and white clouds. I feel like I am walking on a very fancy and shiny ship plank.

'What would my L-lord want my mere mortal aptitudes for?' I ask, cautiously lifting my gaze to meet his piercing one. I don't know how to talk to a God; that's not something we're taught. It isn't like one is going to catch us from a free fall, abduct us, and lock us in their castle. Unless that person is me, of course.

The Sun God lifts his chin and rolls back his broad shoulders, glancing down at my scrawny body as if measuring me. 'You're to be my Shadow, Human.'

Apparently, being a God's Shadow comes with some advantages – even though I still don't know what it actually means. One advantage is the room that I am being taken to by two satyr soldiers who had appeared right after the God left the cell. They are heavily armed with spears, their upper bodies dressed in impenetrable golden iron armour that almost blinds me with their reflection of the sun. Many guards are stationed on both sides of the hallways, some holding spears, others wooden bows, with arrows in a brown leather satchel strapped across their backs. I don't understand the need for guards in a place like this. It isn't as if someone would wake up one day and decide to attack a God's palace in the sky, invisible to human eyes.

The room I was given is bright, as bright as it was in the cell, the pale-yellow marble walls reflecting the light cast through the room's only window. The four-poster bed is almost as big as my old bedroom in King Minos' castle. It is dressed in a yellow duvet with musical instruments embroidered into it. I brush it with my fingers, walking towards the big window, paying particular attention to the intricate mythical figures carved into the golden frame. There is a sky-blue sofa under the window, and I immediately wish that I had my astrology and architecture books

with me so that I could sit and read with the comfort of the fireplace across the room. On the wall by the left side of the bed, an opening leads to an actual bathing room. All my life, my baths were in a basin with freezing water and a piece of cloth, and now that I'm here, I have ... this?

Wasn't I supposed to be a prisoner of some sort? Do all of Apollo's prisoners have quarters like this one? Gods, does He have any prisoners other than me? And if so, what have they done?

I go back to the room and throw myself onto the king-size bed, flinching and groaning when my raw back and upper arms hit the mattress, the burns on my skin screaming in agony. I sit back and pull my beige tunic off, biting my lip and shutting my eyes when the fabric gets stuck on the burned patches of skin, peeling some off. Once I'm bare, breathing heavily from the pain, I look at the ruined piece of clothing covered in holes and dried bloodstains where the wax had melted on my skin. The irony is that the God who is keeping me hostage has the power of healing and doesn't offer me a single drop of that courtesy. I mean, would it be that hard?

The golden armoire is equipped with new chitons similar to my ruined one but made of heavy linen with the kind of quality I have only seen worn by the nobility in King Minos' castle. I grab one, walk towards the bathing room, and plunge into the cold water, screaming when my back meets the water. For the first few minutes, it almost feels like I am being skinned alive. I hold on to the rock walls, grunting through gritted teeth. My heart is still drumming like crazy in my chest, but after some time, the sting starts to ease, and a long breath leaves my lungs, my eyes closing in relief.

I'm waken up by the sound of a harp playing and sunshine hitting my face. I rub my eyes and roll on the bed, getting to a sitting position with a moan of pain. After my bath yesterday, I wrapped my back and arms in the best way I could with some white drapes that I found in the bathing room along with the towels, but there was nothing I could do to ease the constant aching on my skin. I gaze around the room, still trying to make sense of the enormity of it all – not only the size of the room but also the fact that I'm alive after going against my father's advice.

My father: did he make it to Sicily as we planned? Does he know that I'm alive? I shake my head at the thought. There is no way for him to

know. He probably thinks he's lost his only son, his only family. A feeling of guilt and shame engulfs me, and a single tear runs along my bony cheek. I had been so selfish, leaving the only person who has ever taken care of me and loved me so that I could have a bit of reckless fun and freedom. He spent years and years building those wings so that we could be free – so that I could be free and see the world – and all I did in retribution was go against his only advice. *Remember Icarus, do not fly too close to the Sun.*

I take a shaky breath and get out of bed. I put on one of the chitons from the armoire and tie the brown sandals around my ankles. The makeshift bandaging can be seen under my tunic; I don't know what the God will think of it – or if he will think of it at all – but I am not about to take it off just for His liking. If he was going to kill me, he would've probably done that already.

There is a letter on the wooden table beside the armoire. It wasn't there yesterday, and I am not sure I want to know how it got there during the night. I pick up the parchment and read its contents: the God wants me in the castle's library, but it doesn't say what for. I leave the letter on the table and make my way to the door, thinking about how I am going to find the library in a place as huge as this.

Unlike yesterday, the halls are empty of living creatures, and I can't help but think of where they are and what they do aside from standing in the halls when someone is brought in – were they brought in by force, as well? I shake my head and try to find my way to the library. Every corridor looks the same except for a door or window here and there, and I'm about to give up and sit on the floor of this marble labyrinth of a castle when I hear the harp again. I have no idea if the harp is where I am meant to go, but it is the only thing that gives me a sense of direction, so I follow the music until the sound is clear, and I'm faced with a huge golden double door. I gape at the intricate Greek stories carved on the surface. Even the labyrinth my father built for the Minotaur is represented on what looks more like a tapestry weaved with gold than a door. I am about to knock when the door opens before me, revealing a room filled with more books than I could ever count and beautiful tapestries hanging in the few places not decorated by books.

'Are you going to stand there all day, or are you going to at least acknowledge the God that saved your life, Mortal?'

My attention immediately snaps to the God who is sitting with a harp between his legs, his posture impossibly perfect while he burns me with a gaze that swipes my body from head to toe and screams, *Disgusting little thing.*

I feel my eyes grow wide and I swallow hard. 'I got lost, sir.'

A bitter laugh leaves the God's mouth as he stands up in all his greatness, golden eyes aglow, and plops into the long reclining couch, a massive tray of food on the small table before him. Only then does the smell of freshly cooked quail eggs hit my nose, and my stomach growls in protest for not having eaten anything since yesterday's breakfast. I am famished. My face must have given me away because the God huffs and makes a gesture to the table.

'Once you finish your work here, you're allowed to eat. This is all yours. You just have to organise that section of the library.' He looks towards a corner of the library that seems to have been the victim of a kid's tantrum ... or a God's. I gulp at the mountain of books and parchment rolls piled up in that corner; it's going to take me the whole day to get it organised.

'Is there any problem, Human?'

The way he says the word *human* is always as if it is poisonous, as if it burns his tongue and he has to spit it out. I swear, if he's so disgusted by my existence as a mere mortal among his great Godness's immortality, why did he bother to save me from my impending death?

'Nothing, Sir,' I replied. 'Is there any particular type of organisation I should consider?' I lift my chin in an attempt to look taller in the eyes of the deity.

A crooked, wicked grin is plastered on his face while he produces a book from thin air, opening it instead of looking at me when answering. 'Alphabetic order. Oh, and make sure they're properly dusted before putting them on the shelves.' A piece of clothing hits my face from nowhere; I sigh and pick it up.

When I am finally finished with the books, all I can think of is the food waiting for me on the table downstairs, where the Sun God is still laying on his couch reading. It would have been nicer if he hadn't stopped playing the harp the minute I arrived – at least then there wouldn't be this deafening silence interrupted only by the occasional turning of pages or

yawns coming from downstairs.

I clean my sweaty brow with the back of my hand and I'm about to head downstairs when I remember a scroll with architecture sketches that I had seen while cleaning. With a swift motion and little thinking, I slip the parchment scroll under my tunic in hopes it is well hidden and walk down the stairs, stopping in front of the reclining couch, my face as blank as stone.

'You're dismissed. You may take your food back to your room,' the deity says without sparing me a look. 'I'll be expecting your attendance at supper time. Also, change those bandages. They reek.'

When the last word leaves his lips, a flash of light blazes where he had just been moments before, and the God disappears before my eyes. Had this been how that letter got into my room? The thought of someone who could kill me with just a look entering my room while I was asleep sends shivers down my spine.

Pushing those thoughts aside, I look at the food tray in front of me, and my stomach churns. Not bothering to get back to my room, I sit down and reach for a fig. Once my teeth rupture the superficial layer, the fruit's sweet juice fills my mouth. After devouring everything on the tray to the last crumb, I walk back to my room – somehow not losing myself this time – deciding to try and get some rest until supper; I will definitely need to be well rested to face the God through a whole dinner.

In my room, I take the parchment scroll from under my tunic and unfold it carefully, tears clouding my eyes at the sight of architecture designs and scribbled notes ... my father's design for the Minotaur's labyrinth. I immediately recognise his style from the hundreds of parchments like these that he used to have laying around everywhere with his plans. Shaking my head and the thoughts in it, I hide the scroll under my bed and start to undo the bandages that cover my wounds. I feel every inch of skin becoming unstuck from the makeshift bandages, their white colour stained with red and yellowish blotches. Disgusted, I dispose of them, throwing the fabrics in the fire and, after bathing, lay on my stomach in bed and drift to sleep.

OGOCHUKWU SQUARE-EGBUCHUA

Land of Aliens and Madness

Prologue: A Meaningless Ramble

Once upon a time, somewhere in the universe, all the ten interdimensional planets were at war.

The war ravaged the ten planets in poverty and destruction and most of them were left uninhabitable for the alien species, the Qbja. It goes to show that no matter the species, war was a given, a necessity, and an obligation.

But one day, these highly intelligent extraterrestrials, with technology the human brain couldn't comprehend, realised they could do what humans had done for centuries: find a weak land rife with virility and steal it.

A simple and brilliant idea that took them since the beginning of the universe to figure out.

So, like a certain non-fictional counterpart, all the leaders of the ten planets gathered, with the exception of Anolas for two reasons: one, most of its inhabitants were wiped out, and two, their species wasn't known for intelligence, ranked the second-least intelligent right after humans.

They set their sights on a less advanced planet with an offensive colour coordination scheme, flush with rich resources and space. For the first time, all the planets were in harmony, forming the Council of Planetary Peace under the Earth Decree. There's nothing like colonialism to bring people together.

And so, their spaceships travelled across many dimensions and timelines in the span of two minutes after their arbitrary decision to conquer Earth, digging their spaceship stands into the soil and sucking the resources of the land and hopes and dreams of the people like roots to moisture.

But I must apologise; I've been a bit dishonest in my revelation of this

historical event. I keep using the words 'Earth' and 'planet' to describe the blue-green monstrosity, but you see, sometimes we forget we're not the only ones in the world and tend to exaggerate.

Earth here, to be taken with a grain of salt, refers to Africa. But, for a semi-factual account, Nigeria. Beyond the east of Nigeria lay Anambra State, which is technically, albeit a small blip, still in Africa. For actual specifics, which are irrelevant, the story takes place in the city of Onitsha.

Now, I know this doesn't sound as grand as if they colonised the Earth, but don't close the book because I lied to you. If we punished everyone for lying, certain presidents wouldn't be in office.

Regardless of what 'Earth' means, people's lives changed for the worst. They were thrown out of their homes to accommodate the refugee aliens, and their king became a mere figurehead who took orders from their colonial office. They stripped them of their right to be anything other than dogs, and the people could do nothing more than bow in the face of their superior technology and intellect.

The people were starved of their land and will to fight. That is until one day I picked up my blade to fight for them. My freelance group of four, the Aka Ike, needed no reward, no motivation but the freedom of our land. But how did it happen? This journey that led to the freedom of my people, led to me rising against all odds to secure my city, state, and country.

This is a story of freedom and heroism, a story of self-actualisation and patriotism and, most especially, a story about me, Obim Nwaeze, the noble protagonist of this tale, and my fight for justice.

'Stop right there!'

In my abstract, narrational space, the voice of my apprentice hollows out. This space is a dark void where I act as a voice of God, but for some inexplicable reason, it has been infiltrated by Amobi.

My pain-in-the-butt apprentice speaks again. 'Why are you just a liar? You know everything you said about yourself is very much not true. The only thing you have risen against is debt, and you're a noble piece of trash. Can we have someone else narrate this story?'

'I'm the protagonist so of course I get narration rights,' I say, suppressing my impatience to resume telling you all about myself. 'Besides, all stories are nothing but lies we feed people, and they eat it up every time because

they're stupid.'

'Don't ruin our credibility before we start!'

'Amobi is right.' I groan. Another one of my apprentices infiltrates my narrative space. This time it was a species that is ranked most elusive in the galaxy: a woman.

'Let me be the narrator. It'll go like this. This is the story of sexiness and servitude, rice, and stew, and, most importantly, it is a story about me, Ife the dominatrix, and her battle for world domination.'

'What kind of story are you trying to tell?' Amobi snaps.

'Both of you should shut up and get out of my narrative space. Side characters and second-place female leads should get out. I am the only one who will narrate this story!' I say indignantly.

'Um ... I hate to interrupt this argument,' the voice of our final member, Ijeoma, calls through the abstract space, 'but this book is in the third person.'

The silence stretched.

'Oh.'

Let's try this again.

This is a story of freedom and heroism, a story of self-actualisation and patriotism and, most especially, a story of a place untouched by common sense and restraint, a land of aliens and madness.

Part One: The Idiots of Ogboli Eke

1. Never Trust Posters with Misleading Titles

'I was dedicated to the cause. I chose the name for no other reason but my sense of justice. Any other accounts are wrong,' so claimed Obim Nwaeze in July 2004.

Words of questionable factuality, collected by Ogochi Samu-Egbo.

Aka Ike. The words stood out to Amobi in his valiant search for a job, bright red on the poster on the community board. The noise of the community centre pattered between wailing children saddled on their

mother's backs in tight wrappers and the heavy footsteps of people who failed to find work.

Fresh from secondary school, Amobi didn't have a similar dissatisfaction of people shuffling in and out of the hastily built stone colonnade for stairs leading to the community board.

Many humans had been displaced out of the big jobs like farming and mining because the Oḅja occupied most of the fertile land for their embassies and houses, so it was common for people to hover around the community board.

Amobi should have ignored that poster, but his eyes kept finding the highly inappropriate word for an organisation. A word with various meanings. To the unsuspecting Igbo man, they'd interpret it as Mighty Hand. A noble interpretation of a group who were strong, regal, and of integrity, as all Igbo men should be, or arbitrariness, a state of unrestrained thinking that had nothing to do with the logic of the world.

But outside of a sentence, the word came out slightly crude and intentionally misleading. It was so grotesque that his cheeks heated up every time he glanced at it.

Anus hands? Seriously?

Aside from the name, another problem came in the form of its vague slogan: anything and everything. The poster mentioned nothing other than its urgent need for a new member, the requirements being someone young with no needed experience.

Amobi would rather not take it, but it was the only job left on the board; everything else was regarding announcements of events like the upcoming Agbogho Mmuo festival or the Redeem Church Harvest Festival.

'You going to take that?'

The person at his side was Beluchi. Was there anyone in Ogboli Eke who didn't know Beluchi? You'd expect to find him lingering there or in some spot that wasn't a house – a gutter, a box, a bench. Parents told their children not to emulate him. He was known as a sad, useless, old man.

'Not sure,' Amobi replied. 'So, you're here again?'

'Well, I lost my job you know. Things happened. You won't understand it because you're young. but as a man who has been on the job market before, I'd advise you to be careful with the job you pick. I know the

economy is hard but be picky.’

Being picky in this economy was not a smart choice. He had no plans of going to university to lighten his brother’s load, nor did he have any marketable skills to be an entrepreneur. So, it was pertinent that he found an apprenticeship to gain some skill. What skills? He was unsure.

Amobi narrowed his eyes at the man. ‘I don’t want advice from a bum like you. Picky my ass. You just don’t have any options.’

He snatched the poster and stomped off. If the village bum told him not to do something then he might as well do it, a logical conclusion based on social conventions.

Amobi walked into the main street, ash falling on his skin from a floating spaceship. It blotted out the sun as it sailed through, a naval vessel fitted with heated blasters at the rudder. They barely ever saw the sun these days with all the smoke and ash, and soon it would be raining season.

Amobi followed a rush of people walking uniformly in two lines running parallel of each other down the sandy roads bracketed by business shacks, gated cement plastered houses and the stagnant gutters in front of all the buildings. The road had no space for cars so only Okada and Keke honked by. This little space created the unfortunate collision with any stray *Obja*.

The extraterrestrials walked in straight lines, keeping a metre of space between them and the humans. The ones passing at the moment were *Sapis*. They came in all forms and sizes with stiff leather dissimilar to their starched wrapper, human-like skin but in different shades of green and blue, and distortions in their features like horns and mumps.

Amobi kept to the obedient humans who wouldn’t slip past their station. He held his breath when the walking *Obja* crossed him, hoping not to be the day’s scapegoat. Nothing settled down until they were gone, the nervous shuffling around him dwindling to relieved sighs.

Was this really life? Amobi wondered. With his mother gone, the world never felt more suffocating. With every day that passed, his mother’s words became less true, those words she’d said on her dying bed.

He still remembered the feel of her hand on his cheeks, both he and Muna crying at her side. The virus ate away at her usually bright skin, hair shedding on her pillow. Yet she shone with a smile that rivalled the sun.

‘Do not cry for my sake. They say they’ve killed us but we’re not really

dead. As long as our hearts still beat in our chests, as long as we remember our culture, our language, and our world then the soul of Onitsha will endure forever.’

The soul of Onitsha had withered away. Now, it held drones that could not fathom the thought of fighting against the ones who mocked them.

Amobi did not diverge from the crowds, from the puppets, until he came across their family restaurant. It was a two-story building out on the open street, modest in appearance, with the walls painted white and a signboard with ‘Muna’s Kitchen’ written on it.

He pushed open the door, the cowbell clanging as he entered. The restaurant wasn’t so busy, and Makua and Chinelo, two of their waitresses, were busy attending to their only customers – a middle-aged couple and a pack of teenagers.

The smoky scent of the ordered Jollof rice relaxed Amobi with its familiarity. You could barely find restaurants that sold their national dishes anymore. Food was one of his brother’s many passions. Amobi wished he was just as passionate about something.

The blue plush seats for the booths formed an L around three other white and blue plastic chairs. His brother was wiping off one of the soup-stained tables. He packed his twists up not to touch the dirty table, muscles tensing on his back as he cleaned.

‘Amobi, welcome back,’ his brother said without looking up. ‘How was the work search?’

He hissed as he went behind the counter, opening the translucent door of the fridge and taking a can of Fanta, ‘Terrible. The only work was some useless-looking job.’

‘You could always work at the restaurant you know.’

But then you’ll never *be free of me*. He clicked open the can and took a swig, the cold drink quenching his sand dry thirst. How long did Muna plan for Amobi to hide behind him?

‘It’s fine,’ Amobi said. ‘You should focus on paying the workers you already have. I don’t want to get in the way.’

‘You’re not,’ Muna declared. ‘What reason does an older brother need to take care of his sibling? The way our mother took care of both you and the restaurant, I’ll do the same.’ He walked past him and scratched his hair. ‘Just do what you can do.’

What could he do? He never found an answer to that, especially when the freedom to do that was near impossible.

He stared at the poster in his hand, slumping onto the seat behind the counter. Muna had six waitresses to pay for as well as keep the restaurant afloat. He didn't have to find a paying job, but he at least needed something that wouldn't have him worrying about Amobi, and then there was the issue of the increasing Qbja gangs.

It wouldn't hurt to at least check out this group, the Aka Ike. He cringed. Still a shitty name.

It was the day of the interview, and Amobi's employers chose to do it at Muna's Kitchen. He'd recommended it over SMS when they asked him to choose a date and place. He tapped his fingers on the table, his eyes darting to the door any time the cowbell clanged.

'Calm down,' Muna whispered, dropping a tray of Zobo on the table. 'You'll do fine.'

If his brother said so, then he'd have to believe it.

The door clanged for the fifth time and instead of his examiners, their guests were Qbja. Not just any Qbja, but Duval Traders that had been harassing their restaurant for a while now. Choma, a Sapis with a jagged horn, led a group of cat Fauli with permed golden-brown fur and mismatched blue-green eyes that scoured the restaurant.

All chatter stilled at their entrance, people parting to let them walk through. Amobi plastered himself into the booth, wishing to disappear into the plush.

It wasn't unusual that groups like Duval Traders with ties to the Qbja Crime Syndicate would use their status to impede local businesses. Just the other day, Tony the barber closed shop because they started to wander around the area. This week, they chose Muna's Kitchen.

Choma stood in front of his brother. 'Where is the money?'

Muna, always the defiant one, continued to arrange the glasses on Amobi's table. 'Dear customer, you may find a seat. Just look. There's so much space.'

'I don't want your disgusting food human,' he spat. 'Pay your dues.'

'What dues?' Muna asked, flashing his usual smile – one part murderous, one part sweet. 'I have no debts, nor have I acted in any way that should

be put to question, or do you Q̄bja have nothing better to do than to interrupt my business?’

It would have been much easier to pay them. The syndicate didn’t work within the laws. Even if they called the age grades or the general police, it would put a bigger problem on their heads.

Amobi grabbed his brother’s shirt. ‘Nwanne, they’re not asking for much. Let’s just-’

‘And so?’ he asked, one brow raised. ‘I won’t allow our restaurant to be bullied.’

‘Bullied?’ Choma said. ‘Don’t be ridiculous. This is just the natural order of things. Those at the bottom of the food chain shouldn’t demand nonsense like rights. You owe us money by our birth right. Hand it over or we tear down this dump.’

‘Dump?’ Muna mumbled.

Uh oh, Amobi thought. That tone. He was pissed, and an angry Muna happened to be the worst thing between the rage of God and an erupting volcano.

He threw the first punch and Amobi gasped. His brother used to be in an age grade, so his strength rivalled that of a baboon, the loud crunch of his assault vibrating through the restaurant. Choma fainted on contact while Muna massaged his fingers.

‘Don’t ever disrespect my mother’s legacy you scum.’ He rolled up the sleeves of his pink shirt. ‘Come at me if you want to fight. The police can’t save you, and I’ll get rid of your bodies before the syndicate can find you.’

Shit. If Amobi didn’t do something, his brother would land them both in steaming hot soup.

The two Fauli bared their teeth but didn’t make it to his brother; two figures knocked them out with a steel staff. Amobi looked stunned as the two Q̄bja crashed into an empty table.

Their perpetrators stood back-to-back with their weapons aloft: a man with the unruliest afro he’d ever seen and a woman as beautiful as the goddesses you read in the texts. Apart from officers of the law, no one used weapons like those, no one with a rational mind anyway.

‘How annoying,’ the man said. ‘Birthright this, birth right that. My own birth right is to make money and be surrounded by hot babes, but me, I’m still suffering.’

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‘Who do you think you are, bastards?’ one of the last two Fauli hissed.

The woman blocked their attack and, in one slick move, grabbed their collars and smashed them into the ground. Amobi’s mouth fell open and, from the reactions of the waitresses and customers, he wasn’t alone.

These crazy people were bold enough to attack the Q̄bja. They were too unruly to be officers but too normal looking to be mindless thugs.

The man thumped the butt of his staff on the head of the fallen Q̄bja. ‘We’re the Aka Ike; nice to meet you.’¹

¹ ‘Zero out of ten chapter. Too much Amobi’ – Ife Agba.

R. AZONA WARSHAW

Swan Mother

Synopsis: *Swan Mother* is a queer speculative fiction on OCD, motherhood, and the way we build families, as spun through the folktales ‘The Wild Swans’ and ‘The Crane Wife.’

1. the room where the light won't find you

It was easy to forget we were a family, after all the years apart. Scattered, like so many wind-blown seeds or a handful of feathers tossed to the sky, my brothers and I drifted across continents.

We moved every year or so, not on purpose but by design, as if we learned from our father that we were only safe when we couldn't be traced. He was a fisherman, out on the deep sea, in the inscrutable cold of the Nordics, making it work with broken Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, and the words for ‘fish,’ ‘danger,’ and ‘booze’ in Finnish. I knew this from the letters that found their way to me every other year or so, not from the man himself. He went to sea when I was fourteen, handing me and Rafe off to whichever relatives would take us. First Gran, but she got sick, and our visas were up, and then Wolf John, who was maybe an uncle, but no one would say, and then my mom's old friend Razza from some half-forgotten past life in the cabaret scene, and then Rafe was eighteen, and it didn't matter so much where we were as long as we were together.

The other brothers split with my dad, not following, but fleeing in the same vein. Riddic went to Egypt because he could (or maybe he was going to Palestine to join the resistance and couldn't say), and Eoin and Oisin, twins through and through, went to Poland because that was where Dad's dad had been born, before he lived through the camps and came to the US. I doubt they found anything like home there, but I understood the

impulse. Cathal was predictable and went to the forest, maybe the Hoh, or maybe the redwoods, or maybe to plant a new one. Fionn, my flashy brother, joined a Broadway tour on sheer strength of persona. Rafe stuck with me, because we weren't twins, but we were as good as. I don't know how we did it, but we finished high school, and some little liberal arts college was fool enough to give me a scholarship. Probably the sob story about the dead mom and the absent father and the scattered brothers made them think they could use me for a diversity quota, or on a poster, to say, 'Look at what we can elevate! Cinderella from the mud!'

I transferred every year, each new school taking me closer to a finished degree, and each leaving taking me farther away from having to put down roots, or perhaps each unwoven end getting me that much closer to being ready to join my brothers when they inevitably came home to roost. They would. I remember living in a small house on the edge of the woods, in a nowhere state in America, all seven of us woven around my mother as she told us stories. We were all one thing. A continuous press of bodies strung together by blood, a litter of puppies or a line of ducklings. I am sure it is the haze of time and the gauzy curtain of grief, but my mother glowed like a bonfire in the midst of us. She was the warm light that threw itself on each of us, illuminating by reflecting. And my dad, on the edge, a smile hidden underneath his big gray beard, like he thought the hair would hide the love. We had that, once. It's only a matter of time before we find it again.

I get why they ran, because I ran, too, my life from fourteen on something that could be condensed into a duffel bag and a backpack, at the drop of a feather. I get itchy when I see the same walls for too long. When the neighbors start remembering my name. When they ask questions. I don't know if it's because people were weird about Mom being dead, or there being seven of us, or if my dad's intermittent stories about how they came for his dad, about the seven brothers his father was one of, about the way the other six wasted away, or were shot for trying to run, or were buried alive, or – he told us, if we could leave and no one would kill us for it, we might as well keep moving. If we don't stay put for long, they won't find us when the time comes.

Who *they* are, I wouldn't know. When Zayde came to the US, more skeleton than man, he left any knowledge of Torah or Talmud or mitzvah

behind. *What good is God*, he told my dad, *when he couldn't save us? How can I believe*, he added, *that with a mighty hand he took us out of Egypt when he couldn't lift a finger to ease our way in the camps?* My father had no bris, but he was raised into the fear. Zayde stitched it into his blood, fortified his bones with the certainty that one day, maybe tomorrow, maybe in a year, he would have to hide. To run. It was not an 'if,' but 'when'. It didn't help that Mom grew up with the Travelers, always in motion. On both sides, we had the ingrained understanding that the only real safety was found in the ability to move. To be untraceable. To be inaccessible. If we couldn't move, we had to be remote enough to see, on the horizon, the approaching lights, the wailing, and the smoke that signified the oncoming threat. Police, or Nazis, or Garda, or villagers with pitchforks – they were one and the same to my parents.

No wonder the settling was broken when Mom died. She wasn't a root system, but she was home, and home could be held a little longer than the basic 'place to stay'. Of course, my father left as soon as he had somewhere to put me and Rafe, the young ones who couldn't set out on our own, even if we were, at the time, convinced that we could have. Of course, the others followed. It was all we had ever known – the path away, as opposed to the path towards.

It is unspoken, that we each keep track of a couple of the others. Addresses change all the time, Cathal drops off the radar, or Riddic is undercover, or Eoin offends someone and Oisín has to make good before they flee, or Fionn takes up with another closeted superstar. Rafe and I take notes; we spread out the knowing between the two of us, if only to allow us the illusion of anonymity, or perhaps control. Some of them – Riddic, mostly – are involved with things we shouldn't know much about, if only because it is safer that way. I love them. I love the promise of them, as much as the present. Rafe and I are the easiest to find, probably because we are the youngest. Because we have only the fantasy of family and are always running towards the light of that, as much as the rest are arrows notched and set towards distant targets I may never see. They are aimed out of this world. To the distant horizon, they are intended to escape the boundaries of land, or sea, all intended towards the sky.

And I? My eyes are on the joining of land and sky, of course they are, but my dreams are of my mother and the room they left her in when she

died, the room where the light had been snuffed. The first place I found where the light couldn't reach me. I remember her slack jaw and her limp hands, the way she was still for the first time ever, and I think: what is the point of all of this running if we are not headed towards the light? Perhaps that is in the sky. But it is as easily in the lack of space between us, in a living room stocked with hand-knit blankets, and a fire that looked like my mother. I am always aimed there, the heart of memory, the hope of a future that could look like that. It is, of course, hard to shuck off the practice of a lifetime of leaving nothing behind. Maybe I could become a migratory bird, in motion, but always returning. A girl can dream.

2. you peak in desolation

The fire lookout was Rapunzel's tower high. It was spindly, delicate. When I first came to work there, I was surprised it had withstood the wind, let alone the fire. It was like Baba Yaga's hut had planted itself, grown old, died, and its bones were still there, barely supporting the room that was meant to support me for a whole summer. Sometimes, when I returned from my walks, I was afraid she'd be there, reclaiming her home. I wasn't sure I'd battle her for it.

Along the path to the tower there were huckleberries. They led the way, like breadcrumbs, to the witch's house. I was the witch, the children, and the wild animals eating the trail all at once. When I ate them, as I did on every journey up and down, the huckleberries got underneath my nails. I wiped the juice off on the grass. I liked to take my time getting there, when my water skin was full, as it always was. The forest was beautiful enough to never become routine or rote to me. It was always ... infinite. The sky had no end, and the trees were doubled on the lake's surface. When I got up to my tower, my feet ached, and my stomach sloshed with water and huckleberries. The summer sun hadn't set yet (it never did, when I was on my walks). When I looked out – not for fires, just to look – I saw bunched fabric mountains with long-healed scars of road rippling along them. The clouds were the same kind of rumped as the mountains, only closer to ghosts than solid stone. A different kind of memory echoed. Unspun, Rapunzel unfurled her white braids, forgotten and alone in her tower. I

took over for her in the summertime, I liked to imagine. In those long, hot months, she could climb down the side of the turret, run through the trees and up the mountains. Taste the berries, and the water from the lake.

In those summers, the fire-watch summers, time moved without moving. It grew like hair, imperceptible, until you could not see through it. I could not see through time, to the other side. I watched. I could have been reduced to a pair of eyes and would not have noticed otherwise. And the fires did not come. The fall did, with flaming leaves, infernos in their own right, the scarlet, ochre, umber, dirt of the season's shift. Then the rangers came and collected me from Baba Yaga's hut. I didn't want to leave, but my contract was up. It happened, two times, two unusual times, that I came to the end of the season and chose to sign back on. It wasn't that I was staying, I told myself; it was that I was picking out familiar escapes. I was guaranteeing my absence. It perturbed me that I stuck around, but I could pretend the other lookouts were strangers, since we only spoke over the radio, and I kept my calls brief. Any open space, empty air, was taken as an invitation to chat. The other lookouts complained of loneliness, rather graphically, over the radio. They yearned after imaginary wives and lovers (no one with someone to come home to would choose to spend months in a room on sticks). I preferred to avoid these radio dramas. I was there for the forest, not friends.

I got to know the trees. I listened: they spoke in insect swarms, in birds leaping into the air to fly, in branches dropped in the occasional storm. I took notes on their health, on their leaf patterns. First it was for Cathal, and then it was for me. For my own studies. While I watched the forest, I crocheted. I liked crocheting since it was thoughtless. At least, the way I did it was. I did it to mark time, building a blanket of greens and blues. I swam in the ponds, no longer afraid of the swans, or perhaps at peace with them.

Two summers already I had sat, watching for the fires. Two summers I folded myself into the corners of the lookout, crocheted blanket after blanket, adorned the sparse cot with variegated yarn. The second summer, my girlfriend from college came. Only for a bit, but it was the longest I'd ever kept someone, which wasn't saying much, but she was my first girlfriend ever, and I was weak for the idea of someone loving me, not because of blood or circumstance, but because they chose to. She chose to,

and I let her in. It was terrifying.

Ed was an art major I met by accident when I got lost in the humanities building. She made miniatures of Victorian houses and wore exclusively green and black, like mold made human. She was stunning. We'd dated for my whole junior year, and there was no sign of stopping. I hadn't told any of my family about her, but who could blame me? I didn't want to do anything brash when the letter could reach them so late that we could have already been broken up. I didn't want to jinx it by telling anyone who mattered. I couldn't even tell Rafe, that's how huge the fear was. That's how weak loving her made me. She suited me, or I tried to shift myself to suit her. Edwina and Elise. Ed and Eli, your favorite gay male couple of lesbians. Or something. I didn't know what I was. Did it matter? A definition? When I was off and running to the next place before anyone had a chance to make any real assumptions about me? I didn't need to pin anything down.

Ed was pretty certain. Sometimes it was nice to be certain about things like that. Defining anything made me twitch. Not knowing for sure also made me twitch. Ed thought it was funny, which helped me breathe a little easier. Still, when we parted that May, after finals were in and done and I had packed everything up to go off to the woods and the mountains, she wanted to define us. We were already dating, officially, but she wanted a guarantee that we would last past the end of the summer. Into the next school year, she meant. *Nothing is certain*, I told her, especially where forest fires were concerned. Especially when I had little-to-no cell service, at best. I could promise letters, but that had to be enough. She wanted to visit me. I told her it would be no fun for her with all the silence and the hours of hiking, but I couldn't tell her I wanted the silence, and the hiking. I needed space. Yawning chasms of space, or I would go all champagne supernova and implode. I liked Ed; loved her, maybe. Still ...

The missing of her, of the space she occupied next to me, and the presence of her that I had gotten used to, attuned to, without noticing, won me over. She visited for a weekend. It was pleasant. Good to see her, hard to share my little world. She was out of breath after the hike to the tower. Her shoulders dipped under the weight of the pack, but she still looked at the tower like it was the gates of heaven, or something else indescribably lovely. She glowed with sweat. I kissed her, and she tasted

like salt. I had missed her with an ache I didn't allow myself to prod. I took her swimming in the big lake to cool off. She looked like a selkie. An angel made of algae, with her kelp-green hair. Her brown skin glistened in the clear lake. All I could do was watch.

'Did you name your tower?' she asked me as we held each other on the narrow twin bed. Regulation firmness, standard issue, the ranger who'd given me the tour before told me.

'No, not really.'

'Why not?' She lifted an eyebrow at this.

'Feels like bad luck to claim something that isn't mine.'

'Oh.'

Silence gaped, and I could sense her falling out of like. Or maybe it was me. I squeezed her. She squeezed me back.

'I do think it's kind of like Baba Yaga's hut, though,' I offered.

I could feel her smile against my face, and I kissed her again, in the dark. It was a long kiss, an 'I dreamed of you' kiss. I didn't do much fire-watching that weekend. My eyes were too busy keeping track of her. Memorizing her movements, the sparkles in her eyes, the way they turned almost crimson when the sun hit them. I savored her, just like I savored solitude.

I gave her the green blanket I'd crocheted for her when she left. She wrapped it around her shoulders, and with the green hair, she looked like the forest. After all the time apart, though, I understood how to talk to the trees better than I knew how to talk to her.

I transferred schools, as I had always planned. I didn't know how to tell Ed, who had parted from me with the dream of an apartment in a Victorian home, a cat or two, and too many plants – a shared life. I didn't know how to tell her, so I didn't. I kissed her when she left the tower that summer, the second one, and didn't say a thing. I cried when I watched her go, watched her like a fire, as she picked her way down the trail, the blanket still caped around her shoulders. I loved her, I decided, after she disappeared. I could not keep her. I let her go.

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This year's volume is the fourteenth. Yes, that's right, the fourteenth, not the twelfth. Earlier volumes were numbered incorrectly, for reasons opaque and obscure to us. In correcting this longstanding error, we hope to re-establish the true lineage of *The Manchester Anthology*, which we have had the pleasure of sustaining.

First off, we'd like to thank the graduating students who contributed to the anthology. It's been a pleasure working with you, and we look forward to seeing whatever you turn out next.

We'd also like to thank those students who helped us develop the anthology, its trappings, its trimmings. We couldn't have done it without you – not on time, and not like this.

From the Centre for New Writing, we'd like to thank Frances Leviston for her guidance. John McAuliffe, Michael Schmidt, and the staff at Manchester University Press also deserve credit here. Thanks must also go to Kamila Shamsie for her foreword, and again to John, as well as to Ian McGuire, for their endorsements.

For his design work, we thank David Webb; for her cover art, we thank Georgia Harmey; for their marketing know-how, we thank Jonathan Brown and Benjamin Thomas.

To our families, our friends: all the best.

A woman aroused by moss. The crushing weight of corporate life. Cursed twins and broken families. Haunted ghosts and a washed-up colossus. The travails of an aspiring actor. Ruin, renewal, and something in-between. Communities on the brink, realities out of sync. Hidden histories, uncertain futures, shimmers of hope. And much more ...

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With a foreword by **Kamila Shamsie**

