

Superlative

Keeping writing alive



New Beginnings

2020

Superlative – The Short Story Literary Journal
2020 Issue – New Beginnings



Published in association with Ross Turner Books

- Keeping writing alive -

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Superlative publishes once a year in the UK and is available worldwide.

Please visit www.rossturnerbooks.com for themes, competitions, submission guidelines and subscriptions. Please encourage everyone you know who is interested in new writing to submit and subscribe, because that is the only way to keep writing journals alive.

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Preface

New beginnings can be literal: a birth; the start of a career many years in the making; or the first issue of a short story journal. They can be metaphorical: a decision; the clichéd turning over of a new leaf; or the notion that good writing doesn't simply materialise, but takes years to cultivate.

I founded *Superlative* because I felt I had something to offer new and aspiring writers, and I wanted to give it to them. But what is *it*? The motivation to write, and write, and write, despite the isolation and lack of recognition? The confidence to submit their work for publication, knowing they might be rejected? Perhaps simply the comfort of knowing most writers face the same challenges, and that we all feel the same whilst confronting them?

Perhaps I am off the mark, but I was inspired by writing journals, magazines and anthologies when I was a student of writing; I still am a student of writing, and believe I always will be – being so subjective, it is unlikely anybody will ever master the art. It was through submitting my own work – and being both accepted and rejected – and meeting other writers and editors, that I began to believe I might be able to aspire to something similar myself.

The writing journals, magazines and anthologies I subscribed to and read were all excellent – the brainchildren, I assume, of other likeminded writers and editors who wanted to do something more. But none of them were ever quite exactly what I wanted them to be, of course, because they were what somebody else wanted them to be.

So, *Superlative* – the New Beginnings 2020 Issue – is my first attempt to create a writing journal that is exactly what I want it to be: a collection of stories by as yet unknown or new writers, edited by myself and my two co-editors, Gemma Mainwaring

and Rachel Wollaston, chosen not solely because of their writing and editing skills, nor because their strengths and preferences are different to my own, but because I trust them. I am thrilled to have contributors from across the globe, and to truly be able to call *Superlative* an international, literary journal.

We hope you enjoy it; thank you for keeping writing alive.

Ross Turner

Birdsong

Short Story Competition Winner

It was sunny out but inside the house, it smelt of damp and cigar smoke. Mawron Belaris sat slumped in his worn velvet armchair, watching the crows outside gobbling the seed he'd scattered across the grass. His face was shadowed by the brim of his Tigers baseball cap as the tip of his Montecristo cigar flared red.

The radio announcer introduced the top charting song of 1995, the familiar introduction heaving him out of the chair to switch the machine off. He cast another look at the birds, observing their sideways method of approaching something head on. The woman from across the road came out of her house, her long, black hair swaying like a dark flag as she headed to the bus stop in a pale blue dress and beige shoes.

'Where's Megumi going?' he muttered, pressing his nose flat against the window. She was new to the area, having moved in a few months ago. Each morning when he was outside feeding the birds, she was out too, watering her plants, accompanied by a grey Persian cat. A nod grew into a smile or brief wave. She started showing up at his door with food. Symmetrical green tea cakes with red bean icing or nori rolls containing cucumber and salmon. She never spoke, just smiled, bowed and held out the plate of food. He accepted her gifts, his lips twitching beneath his beard, unable to say that he no longer ate Japanese food. Tucked in the last platter of nori rolls was a handwritten note which read:

Dear Sir, it would be my pleasure to invite you to my home for afternoon tea on a day of your convenience. Sincerely, Megumi.

Unaccustomed to receiving invitations, he stuck it to the fridge where it reminded him of what was piling up inside each time he passed.

The phone in the hallway rang.

‘Christ.’ Plodding to answer it, he cursed his lifelong habit of not being able to let a phone ring out.

‘Belaris,’ he barked into the receiver.

‘Am I speaking to Mr Mawron Belaris?’ an American voice chimed.

‘Who’s asking?’

‘This is Felicia from the US Department of Defence. This is a courtesy call about the invitation.’

‘What invitation?’ He coughed, the phlegm rising quick in his chest. He imagined Felicia wincing.

‘Sir, can you first please answer a few security questions? What is the first line of your address?’

‘Can’t remember.’ He flicked off a slipper and rubbed his bare foot against the other ankle.

‘Excuse me?’

‘The Milky Way. None of your business.’ He grunted and hung up. Even Australia was not far enough, they always found him.

‘Pests,’ he muttered looking down at his itchy foot. A red lump ballooned from the ridge of his bunion. They had started coming up on his feet and calves a few weeks ago. At first, he thought they were flea bites from Betty but his pet manual had informed him that budgies don’t get fleas. They get mites.

‘Betty,’ he crooned, approaching the birdcage sitting in the laundry. He lifted the grey towel, revealing a small puff of blue and white feathers. Betty twittered, her tiny head bobbing as Mawron topped up her seed tray, watching her spit kernels onto the cage floor as she feasted. She flapped her wings, inching

herself closer along the perch towards his face which was pushed up against the metal bars.

‘Fat Man,’ she chirruped. ‘Fat Man. Fat Man.’

The smile left Mawron’s face as he straightened, his eyes scanning the back garden from the laundry window. Months of weed growth sprouted between the paving slabs and the wheelbarrow remained on its side where he’d left it a year, or was it two years ago?

‘Fat Man,’ Betty continued, chanting the two words that he hadn’t spoken for years. She’d started doing so one morning out of the blue and, after three nights of being kept awake, he moved her cage out of his bedroom to the laundry but whenever she saw him, the refrain repeated.

Mawron winced as Betty continued her song, pins and needles travelling from his shoulders down towards both hands as his chest tightened. He shuffled out of the laundry to the front door, whipping the chain from the bracket and shoving it open.

‘Bloody bird,’ he wheezed, walking onto the lawn, startling the murder of crows who departed overhead in one swift body. He squinted against the glare of the sun, ducking his head down only to see his robe hanging open, framing the bare flesh beneath. He pulled it shut, scowling at the children and parents passing on the school run, clenching and unclenching his fists until his chest eased. A sudden curl of dense warmth circled his ankles. It was the grey Persian from across the road.

‘Scat,’ he muttered, shaking it off his leg. ‘Go home.’

The cat stared up, its golden eyes blank, and sat down beside him.

‘Shoo,’ he growled, nudging it with his foot. ‘Get going with you.’

The beast stood, arching its back before stalking away, its bushy tail waving side to side. Mawron watched until it had left his property and turned to go in.

He was outside early the next day with the heat of the morning sun on his face. Reaching into his robe pockets, he showered birdseed across the lawn, enjoying the squawking that ensued amongst the waiting crows. He noticed Megumi was out, watering the flowerbeds that bordered her red brick house. Unlike him, she was dressed for the day in jeans and a white shirt, the sleeves rolled up to her forearms. He arced the remaining seed through the air, keeping an eye on her short figure as it inched around the perimeter of her garden.

A cloud of grey bounced into his vision, scaring off the remaining birds. It was the Persian again, sniffing at the dead rose bushes lining the fence that separated his house from next door. Mawron watched as the cat scratched a furrow in the soil before settling back on its haunches.

‘Oh no you don’t.’

He lunged forward, scooping the creature up before it could start its business and headed across the street, the rubber soles of his slippers grating against the bitumen.

Coming to a halt at the wooden fence that bordered Megumi’s property, he stood for a few seconds, the squirming cat in his grasp.

‘Excuse me. Hello?’ he called but her back was to him and she made no reply.

‘Hello,’ he barked, louder this time, kicking the fence with his foot. She turned, her eyes widening.

Up close, he guessed she was in her mid to late forties from the faint grey that streaked through her dark ponytail, but it was hard to tell. From his experience of Japanese women, they seemed ageless until one day, at some point in their seventies, they woke up ancient. She was short, the top of her head barely reaching his shoulders which together with her slight frame lent her an air of girlishness. The cat made a sudden lurch for

freedom, landing sure footed on the ground before streaking back across the road towards Mawron's property.

'Your cat is always at my house.'

Out loud, the words sounded like an accusation which he regretted. He rubbed his scalp and wondered what to say next.

'Thank you for the invitation. Meg...Megumi.'

It was the first time he'd ever said her name out loud. Her face brightened and she nodded, bowing slightly. He could see her small, white teeth, teeth that had probably never needed braces. He waited for a reply but none came, only the gush of water from the garden hose onto the sodden flowerbed. He pointed to it and she exclaimed silently, turning it off before pulling a small notebook and pen from her shirt pocket. She scribbled something and held out to show him.

'I can't read it.' He squinted. 'I don't have my glasses.'

She grinned and wrote something else. Up close in profile, Mawron admired the tight smoothness of her jawline as the notepad was thrust again into sight.

'CAN'T TALK. VERY SORRY.'

Mawron looked up. She was smiling. Did she ever stop smiling?

'Cat got your tongue,' he joked which wiped the smile from her face.

'I AM MATE.'

'Mate?'

'MAUTE.'

'Mute,' Mawron read aloud. 'You're mute?'

She nodded, her ponytail bobbing up and down.

'Oh.' He considered this, but not for long.

'Well, I would still like to accept your invitation to afternoon tea,' he declared, his voice louder just in case she was a bit deaf as well. She beamed, bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet.

'TOMORROW. 3PM?'

He nodded and hurried back over the road, biting his lip to stop himself from smiling.

It had been many years since he'd last worn the suit, a fact made clear when he found it ill-fitting where it should have sat smooth and sleek. He patted the mat of gelled hair that had taken much effort to achieve with his greying curls. He'd shaved too, startled at the face that emerged in the bathroom mirror, the two scars on his left cheek still vivid and unfaded with time.

He stood and for a moment considered stripping it all away, putting back on the robe lying on the floor. His stomach, defying the strictures of the buttoned shirt, protruded over the waistband of his black trousers, mocking his attempts to button up his jacket. He took a slug from the silver hip flask in his hand, the whisky setting his sinuses aflame. He snorted, wiping his nose on his jacket sleeve, and turned to leave.

It was no more than seventeen steps from his front door to Megumi's but as Mawron reached for her door knocker, his feet were already aching, squashed into the brown leather brogues from his wedding day and his face glazed with sweat. He'd barely knocked before the door swung open revealing Megumi in a buttercup yellow dress with short sleeves, looking cool and fresh. She bowed and he copied, bowing as low as his stomach would allow. He held out the champagne he'd dusted off that morning, hastily remembering to offer it with both hands. She took it and bowed, he bowed again and she motioned for him to enter.

He stepped inside, finding himself in a small entry way painted white. Pairs of shoes were stacked on a rack by the door and remembering the Asian war on shoes, he knelt to untie his shoelaces, his knees, gut and back all fighting against him. In a

flash she was down by his feet unlacing his shoes for him, tugging them off his feet.

‘Thank you,’ he said, his voice breaking the silence between them. She paired his brogues on the floor before picking up the champagne and beckoned him to follow. They walked towards a closed door at the end of the hall where she paused, glancing back at him before pushing it open.

Chittering and tweeting echoed through a cavernous room, the cacophony bouncing off the walls. His gaze went upwards to the multitude of wicker bird cages suspended from a long metal beam spanning the width of the pitched roof. He stared. Parrot. Parrot. Finch. Not sure. Was that a cockatoo? In the largest cage was a tiny mass of yellow which trilled faster than all the others. He moved closer and guessed it was a canary.

A loud gong noise reverberated through the room, drowning the bird chatter. Startled he turned and saw Megumi standing by a rosewood sideboard where a small brass gong sat, a miniature rubber mallet in her hand. He wondered if her lack of speech gave rise to a fondness for noisy objects as he walked towards the table which was laid with a white porcelain tea set. Cakes, biscuits and eclairs were arranged on a tiered silver cake stand and the sight of the food set his stomach rumbling. He noted with relief that there were no red bean cakes or mochi balls.

Coming close, she held out a Nokia mobile towards him. Typed on the phone’s small screen in large font were the words PLEASE SIT DOWN. He glanced around again, taking in a series of Japanese calligraphy scrolls hanging on the white walls; dark, inky characters which he didn’t need to understand the meaning of to interpret. Megumi pulled out a chair, dusting it down with her hand and tugged his sleeve.

‘SIT,’ she mouthed.

Table manners were a trait of his past which he now struggled to recollect. He placed the napkin into his lap and waited. She pushed the stand towards him so he selected two chocolate

cupcakes, a square of lemon shortbread and a large slab of carrot cake, stopping when there was no more room on his plate. His hand hovered around the cutlery and when she nodded, he finished the carrot cake in five mouthfuls.

‘Humm,’ he sighed, splattering crumbs onto the tablecloth. ‘I like pineapple in carrot cake.’ He licked the remainder of the frosting from his lips and burped.

She looked tiny seated opposite him and, remembering his manners, he pushed the tiered stand towards her before patting down his jacket pockets for a cigar which wasn’t there.

Instead of eating she stood and poured pale, green liquid from the teapot into his bone china cup. The scent of the steaming, verdant tea brought back memories of his time in Japan, of the first time he’d sipped green tea and the surprise taste of rice within it. It had been outside on a garden patio on a warm Tinian afternoon, the birds in the trees as vocal as the ones surrounding him now.

‘You like birds?’ he asked. His voice sounded odd in this chamber room where only birds sang. She nodded, before taking a small bite of an éclair. He noted the smear of cream remaining on her face with a prick of satisfaction.

‘Are all those birds legal? Australian quarantine being what it is.’

Her face clouded over and he worried that he’d said the wrong thing. It was hard to tell with Asians. He slurped the tea, eyeing her over the brim of the cup, the art of conversation eluding him, much like the woman across the table. He thought he’d seen everything during the war but this was a first, taking tea with a mute.

‘I have a bird,’ he babbled. ‘Betty.’

Her smile returned, spurring him on.

‘My wife loved birds. After she left, I was in the habit of keeping one. Betty’s the latest.’ He paused, watching her thumbs flying across the Nokia keypad.

‘WHERE DID SHE GO?’

‘My wife? She went back to Japan.’

‘WHERE IN JAPAN?’

‘Tinian. Do you know it? Where are you from in Japan?’

It occurred to him that he knew nothing about her, apart from her fetish for birds.

‘MY FAMILY FROM NAGASAKI.’

He shifted in his seat as she walked over to the rosewood sideboard where several framed pictures sat. Holding the largest out to him, he saw an old black and white photo of a young child sitting on her mother’s lap. The child’s expression was solemn while the mother, a young Japanese woman dressed in a plain kimono, had forced her lips into a smile.

‘Your mother? You?’ His finger jabbed the child’s sullen face.

She nodded, returning the frame to its place. She poured more tea and placed a Florentine and lemon curd tart on his plate. He leaned back into the chair, stretching out his belly as the Nokia headed his way again.

‘HOW DID YOU MEET WIFE?’

Ex-wife he thought as memories flashed through his mind. Their first encounter during the war on Tinian Island where he’d worked as part of the Project A delivery group and how she’d asked him to take her to America, much to the disgust of her family who disowned her. How her inability to bear children was the beginning of the end for their marriage, the last years impregnated with silences between them until she found the words she had used to end their marriage.

‘I can’t ignore the past anymore.’

He flushed, blinking back into the present. Megumi was staring at him, her face neutral apart from the curl of a smile drifting about her lips. He wondered why she smiled so much now when as child, she did not.

‘We met a long time ago. In Japan,’ he said, waiting for her to reach for the phone but she didn’t, only for a shortbread biscuit. Unnerved by Megumi’s forensic gaze, he blurted, ‘Have you always been mute?’

She cocked her head, taking a bite from the shortbread before typing.

‘YES. BORN THIS WAY.’

He nodded because that seemed the best reply.

‘RADIATION.’

He bristled as if a predator had emerged from behind the calligraphy scrolls.

‘I,’ he faltered. ‘I didn’t think you were old enough to have been in the war.’ His heart hammered as he watched her type.

‘MY MOTHER. NOT ME.’

She nodded to the photo of the woman with the rictus grin. He followed her gaze, looking at the monochrome portrait as if for the first time. Bile surged up into his throat, his tongue tasting salt as he realised sweat was trickling down his face. He grabbed the napkin, rubbing his forehead. She came to stand by him, holding the screen under his nose but he looked away and tried to get up from the table when something furry brushed his ankles.

‘Argh!’

Megumi’s grey Persian was staring up at him, its yellow eyes impassive. Rescuing him from further contact, Megumi scooped up the feline, cradling it in one arm where it unleashed a rackety purr, as she typed into her phone with the other hand.

‘OK?’

He nodded, mopping his face.

‘It’s nothing,’ he muttered taking in the cat’s ecstatic expression as Megumi rubbed her cheek against its head before putting it down.

‘Brave to have a cat amongst all these birds,’ he murmured, his hands shaking.

‘KOKI,’ the screen said.

‘Cocky?’

She nodded towards the cat as it trotted out of the room.

‘Cocky,’ he snorted, choking into laughter. Megumi’s face took on the frown of the child in the photo as tinned hilarity fizzled into hiccups and he made his excuses and left.

Beneath the suit, his skin felt on fire. He grappled with the tight seams, peeling it off as soon as he was through his front door. Standing in his underwear, the relief was minimal, the angry red bumps that had started as polka dots on his feet and calves now extended upwards, populating his groin, chest and back. Going into the toilet to piss, he aimed at the urine stained bowl while scratching the infestation, drawing blood with his ragged fingernails. Spitting in the basin, he went in search of his robe, first picking up the post he had collected on his way in. He flicked through the flyers and bills, pausing at the cream envelope embossed, ‘Department of Defence. United States of America.’ Lips pursed, he clamped it under his armpit as he headed upstairs, passing the open laundry door on his way.

‘Fat Man. Fat Man,’ Betty sang but he ignored her, treading heavily to his bedroom where he found the discarded robe on the floor. Shrugging it on, he sagged onto the bed, barely able to keep an upright position as the springs creaked under his weight. He took a deep breath and tore open the clammy envelope, shaking out the folded letter at arm’s length. He fumbled for his glasses on his bedside table, skimming over the formalities until he reached the sentence, ‘invitation for all surviving members of Project Alberta, including both Fat Man and Little Boy teams, to a memorial reunion, postmarking the fiftieth anniversary of the bombing of Nagasaki.’

His nostrils flared, invaded by the scent of singeing, as he reread the sentence over and over until the letter fell from his hand as he lumbered out of the room.

Memories surged to the surface as he staggered downstairs, in search of water. He barged into the kitchen, yanking open the Kelvinator door, peering inside. Two cans of Swan Lager and the remains of a takeaway pizza lay on the bottom shelf, beneath the upper shelves laden with Megumi's offerings. The sight of her food nauseated him, the sheer amount fuelling a rage which sent his arms spasming, yanking each platter out, all of them hurtling to the floor. Blood pumped through him, inflaming the maddening itch laying wait beneath his skin. He snapped open a tin of Swan Lager and downed it, burping fumes onto the shards of broken china, rice and pickle at his feet.

'Fat Man. Fat Man,' the bird sang from the laundry.

'Shut up,' he screamed.

'Fat Man.'

The broken china cut his bare feet as he careened to the laundry, his body unsteady as if he'd drunk twenty lagers, not one. The little blue and white head bobbed up and down in greeting.

'Fat Man, Fat Man, Fat Man.'

'Shut Up. Shut Up,' he growled, saliva pooling at the back of his mouth.

'Fat Man. Fat Man.'

His hands closed like pincers on the cool metal wire as he lifted the cage up high above his head, before smashing it down onto the ground.

First there was silence, and then ragged breathing that seemed to be coming from him.

'Fat Man.'

He looked. The bird was broken, both wings at unsightly angles.

'Fat Man.'

The greeting now turned plea fish-hooked into his conscience. He pried open the cage door and retrieved the shaking bird which trembled in his hand and with one swift pop, broke its neck.

‘Bye Betty,’ he croaked, stroking the still warm body, the sight of which unfurled fifty years of torment. Erupting into motion, he barged through the laundry door and flung the dead bird far out into the garden.

His emergency stash of whisky had done its work. He lay on the floor in the lounge blind drunk, unable to get up for the swirling sensation as soon as he tried. From his vantage point, he watched the blues and pinks of the evening sky turn dark, warmed only by the glow of streetlights in the background. He passed out, only to wake and find it darker still, all quiet apart from neighbourhood cars passing and a scratching noise coming from the front window.

‘Betty,’ he slurred. ‘Betty.’

The scratching continued. He tried to sit up, his guts retching as he slumped back down. Gasping, he twisted onto his side like a baby learning to crawl, pushing up on all fours, his head heavy as he crawled towards the window, pulling himself up to the ledge.

‘Who’s there?’

His gummy eyes searched the night streetscape which disappeared from view when Koki jumped up onto the outer window ridge.

‘No,’ he groaned. ‘Get lost.’

Balancing itself, the cat turned towards him, revealing a blue and white feather trapped in its whiskers. It yawned wide, giving him a generous view of its open mouth from which deep within, he heard a bird sing.

‘Fat Man.’

Lui Sit is currently completing her first middle grade children's book and also writes memoir and adult short fiction. She was longlisted in *Spread the Word Life* Writing Prize 2018 and shortlisted in the *Penguin WriteNow* 2018 Memoir category. She is an alumnus of the *Spread the Word* 2018-19 London Writers Award, in the Children & YA category.

Mockingbirds

Short Story Competition Runner-up

My parents lived in a woody, gardeny suburb not far from the entrance of the bridge to the city. It was a good neighbourhood for them because they enjoyed rambles and they liked the protection of cul-de-sacs. They'd moved there nine years ago, in part to be closer to my sister and I, but not so close that our family tradition of vacant and impersonal phone calls would be rudely interrupted by corporeality.

Their house was big enough to afford them privacy from each other. There were two bedrooms if they wished to sleep separately, which they sometimes did, two bathrooms which worked well for my mother's irritable bowel and late night explosions of diarrhoea, and two lounges for each of them to watch their shows. My mother liked documentaries about Chaucer and Wittgenstein, my father liked late night news programs that were at best uncharitable, at worst vitriolic. In so many ways, they were already living separate lives, converging only in the kitchen to cook their meals, lasagne and Greek salad for one and steak and potatoes for the other.

But when the virus came, aggressively, trenchantly, and they told us to pare ourselves off from each other, they started dividing their things, sealing off openings, closing off doorways. Even though they'd had their partitions before, it was an especial separation, like sending a guillotine to slice through a neck when the body and the head have already been excommunicated from one another.

My mother took the kitchen, and my dad put a hotplate in his lounge, where he seared beef and sautéed the odd vegetable. Ironically, as the world shuttered around us, as the fear of this weird and unknowable particulate cavalry intensified, our four-

way calls were becoming more intimate. It must be why murderers fall in love just before they're about to be executed.

'Don't be fooled by all this direct transfer shit,' my dad would say, 'that's what they want you to believe.'

He was talking about a sort of menacing, clandestine *they* that infuriated my sister, a chemist. She would bundle her dark hair to one side of her head in exasperation as we spoke, our faces like a mosaic on my phone screen, rendered sapphire by the tint of the glass.

'So what about a vaccine?' my mother would ask. She was talking to my sister, a geologic chemist, but the closest thing we had to a vaccinologist.

'It's probably coming, in about a year or two.'

'But what about the grass?'

It was a distinct worry for my mom, that in being shut in, she wouldn't be able to mow the lawn. People everywhere had abandoned their gardens, let them grow into untended jungles. Daffodils were being suffocated by arid soil, weeds were spreading like hysterical screams.

'The grass is going to have to wait, mom.'

'Just promise me that if I go first, someone will revive my arums.'

It wasn't a weird way to talk anymore. There was nothing histrionic or theatrical in saying, 'if I die' or, 'when I go'. It just began to feel like fact, like Monday coming after Sunday.

When people began dying in hordes, they started sending out videos to teach us how to grieve. We used to make fun of the one with the mockingbirds. They start out together, and then, with the sound of Brahms' Lullaby in the background, their nest is broken up by the itinerant wind. The image of the adult mockingbirds, half-blinded in the sun, wading through threads and twigs and the dead bodies of their young, seemed like overkill, as it were.

'We'll clean up the twigs, mom.'

My parents still enjoyed laughing together onscreen, about the mockingbirds, about the sound of Mrs Mukherjee next door wailing in Hindinglish in the middle of the night, about the balled up blankets and the upright air-mattress, stood up in the middle of the passageway upstairs, effectively dividing the house into two separate wings, locked in with the plumbing silicone my dad liked to use for just about everything.

‘How’s the weather over there?’ my dad would say to my mom dryly, like it was the cleverest thing.

‘Pretty humid. Stop farting.’

It even started to become enjoyable, the four of us in our capsules, about 20 miles between us but really an infinity away. There was something cushioning about the knowledge that this was the way of happy families and dysfunctional ones alike. It felt equalising.

I enjoy collecting puzzles, especially puzzles from art museum gift shops. Late at night or on Saturday mornings after doing my 60 minute ab-blasting, glute stretching, mind-numbing workouts, I sit at the desk in the corner of my living room and try to build The Rooster Serigraph or The Scream or Marilyn Diptych. It’s like an antidote to how restless and completely impotent I feel, to be able to assemble a whole of something from its parts. It makes me feel like a creator.

So one night, at about 11 o’clock, I was sitting with a bowl of sticky and distended bran flakes and readying to synthesise the fragments of Frida Kahlo’s face when my phone jingled. My mother and my father were on the call already; I think my sister hadn’t answered yet. I could see that my father’s face was turning ocean grey, that he was labouring for breath.

The virus usually progresses in stages, from a sort of huffy cough to a pallor and then a shortness of breath, but my dad seemed as though he’d skipped a stage or two. As he heaved, it was clear that the spaces in his bronchi were shrinking, that there

was a weight burdening the words as they left his lips. My sister beeped in and knew in an instant what she was looking at.

‘I think I’m pretty bad,’ he said, ‘but they said not to come.’ He was talking about the hospital. Very few hospitals were taking people in anymore.

‘What about Charles?’ I asked him.

Charles was one of their neighbours in the close. He was a cardiologist, a renowned one with about 8,000 citations to his name and flattering profiles in the Lancet and the New England Journal of Medicine.

‘I called him,’ my mom chimed in, ‘he says we should say goodbye.’

It was a few hours after that, when we all began to fall asleep with the call still live, that my father woke us by banging a spoon on the bottom of a stainless-steel pot. He was rousing us to bid farewell. I felt my throat burn and my eyes water a little as he mouthed something akin to, ‘Take care.’ His face, despite the clearly apparent brutality of the asphyxiation, had a strange serenity to it, a bucolic twinkle in his eyes.

My sister, with her hair shaped like half of a peacock’s tail after having fallen asleep, sobbed pitifully, and my mom breathed in ravenous breaths. The screen suddenly went dark as the phone left my dad’s hand, falling into his denim-clad lap. In the background was the sound of a querulous man, his voice timorous with grievance, demanding to be freed from the quarantine.

When his phone died about twenty hours later, the square that represented my dad died out. We were talking about what to do with him, how to handle his remains.

‘I called them to come get him. He’s on the waiting list,’ my mother said. She’d called the city, which sent body collectors to peoples’ homes in movie-style plastic suits.

They’d roll the bodies into polythene before vacuum sealing them like frozen steaks.

Three days later, as my father atrophied in his lounge, probably while the angry man railed, I saw a news story that body collectors weren't coming 'until further notice', because they needed the lorries for food rations and the occasional emergency.

Emergencies, as we'd known them, were actually ceasing to occur. Things didn't carry the same urgency that they used to. Because we almost always knew the ending, the act, the production of trying to stop it with some heroic Herculean deed was no longer necessary. Instead, most fires were left to be drowned by the rain and policing had been made largely redundant by people's fear of contact. Ambulances still scurried like termites whose mound was alight, but only if someone important was in danger.

'Wait ten days,' the woman on the television said, 'that should be enough for the virus to burn out, and then bury the body, or better yet,' she said, like a chef discussing whether to use mascarpone or ricotta for a dessert, 'cremate it.'

So my mother waited ten days, and the three of us carried on our conversations almost as we did before, but for the void in my father's corner of the screen, a perfectly finite square in which to contain the residuum of our grief.

'People are saying it's not so bad in the summer...so maybe we'll be able to go outside again.'

My sister was fashioning hope out of the pieces of a rumour. I'd forgotten what season it was by then. There was no snow, but there was no sunshine either. Everything outside seemed like a continuum of grey and blue and black.

'I've not heard the summer thing,' I said, 'but they did say we might be able to stand on our balconies sometime soon.'

My mom, meanwhile, was still preoccupied, I suppose appropriately so, with the disposal of my father's body.

'I'm not going to set him on fire, not in the living room.'

'What about in the basement? You could use that little nook.'

The little nook was a crawlspace really, in the far northwest corner of their basement, underneath the kitchen. It was about six feet by four feet and about five feet high. It was sturdy, with a concrete floor and a concrete ceiling, and an old separator wall made of bauxite stone.

‘That could work...I’d have to drag him down there.’

‘What about my old wagon? Do you still have it?’

I was referring to my post-box-red kiddies’ wagon that I’d drag around the yard at our old house when I was six years old. I assumed that they still had it, because my dad used it to carry around sod and woodchips when he was gardening.

‘The wheel broke off, so we got rid of it.’

It was surprisingly devastating to hear, like the knife was being twisted. Even my sister, who would sometimes get dragged along in the wagon while we played Shipwreck – a game that merely required that I tug her around and then toss her out while imitating the rumble of sea – looked a bit more downcast than she had when it was just our petrifying father we had to contend with.

The conversation about what to do with his body lasted a couple of days. In its morbid way, there was a healing, or at least a pausing of the sorrow. Instead of memorialising him, we were conniving together, plotting as though we were planning a bank robbery. Eventually, my mother resolved that her little garden axe, comically small and timid, would have to be the weapon of choice to carve my father into his constituent parts so she’d be able to move him.

Ten days after he died, my mother, her phone pointing outward from her blouse’s breast pocket, tugged at the blankets in the hallway, tearing at the silicone with a barbecue fork until they gave way, before ripping through the air mattress. My sister and I watched the air seep out with a faint whistle until it was just a lump of baby blue rubber that my mom tossed aside. She covered her face with a violet scarf and stopped at the door to

his lounge. For a few minutes, all we could see were the age rings of the oakwood door, bobbing up and down as my mother's courage waned and her body seized from crying.

When we were younger, she'd been a teacher. She taught English, and History too sometimes, but I think what we learnt from her, in our private moments, was a valorous, stubborn stoicism. It saw her through the deaths of her parents, the wars big and small, and the pain of growing older. I could feel her summon it then, when she had to open the door and face my dad. We caught a glimpse of him, his body swelling into a shiny purplish mass, before my mom raised her arms and her phone fell from her pocket. From then on, we were looking upward at her, watching her face grimace as she hacked at him like a pathetically inept lumberjack, getting the blade stuck in his flesh and then ripping it out again. She hit bone a few times, from the sound of momentary echoes followed by a grating, shaving noise, but she was beginning to tire, and lifted her arms up one last time before tossing the axe at the television, releasing a cursory laugh of triumph when it went silent and burst open to shed its light.

'This isn't going to work,' she said, with a hint of a cough that made me worry that the virus hadn't quite vacated my father's body.

'Just leave it, mom.'

Three days later, I remembered a story I'd read a few years ago, about a criminal gang, and how they sometimes used lye to dissolve members they'd killed. So, with my sister's help, my mom fashioned an oxidising cell made of two metal pots, in which she'd bludgeoned holes to fit a tube filled with a jelly made from the agar powder she used to make panna cotta. She then pulled the carbon rods from the batteries of my dad's battered lanterns to make coils, and when the cell had been constructed and approved by our resident scientist, my mother filled the pots with water and tossed a box of baking soda into

one of them. She waited for a while, covering her face with my father's welding mask, before turning on the heat to make the lye boil. I felt like I was watching Bill Nye the Science Guy.

When there was a sufficient bubbling, my sister told her to toss a piece of aluminium foil into the pot to test the alkalinity. Its silvering constitution quickly gave way, leaving a piece of shrivelled, blackened metal.

'I think it's ready,' my sister said.

My mother coughed even more as her hands, sheathed in leather Max Mara gloves, carried the pot of boiling lye. She seemed to grasp at her throat, but we couldn't see it because she'd left the phone on the mantle.

'Shouldn't I cover him?'

Before we could answer, she left to go to the entrance hall, and returned to pull the phone up and show us the Bijar rug that used to greet guests at the front door. We stared at the ceiling as she put the phone down again and the next thing we saw, it had been done. Our father, the archetypal troubled patriarch, hypertension and all, had been smothered under a rug that was now slowly liquefying into uneven mounds. The chair, too, and even the parquet of the floor were sizzling and scalding into vapours. As the flesh and the fabric returned to nothing, we imbibed the ceremony of it until my mom said that she couldn't breathe, that she needed to go.

So she returned to her bedroom and, not realising that she hadn't turned off the phone, heaved and coughed while she undressed. I caught a brief glimpse of her naked chest, the skin like charred meat, before my sister and I left the call, presuming that she wanted to take a shower.

I don't know if it was the lye or the virus or the combination of them, but that image of my mother's desiccated breasts was the last I saw of her. When we next tried to reach her, there was just another blank square, just the idle sound of an unanswered

call, just my sister and I sharing something not unlike an embrace in the suspended air between us.

With just the two of us, we tried to mourn the way adult children do, uplifting the practical details of what to do with their house and reminiscing out loud about the metallic blue Ford Sierra that we'd both learned to drive in, and that was still parked in their driveway.

'You drove it last. It's yours.'

'I have no idea what to do with that thing.'

'You could sell it.'

'Who'd buy it? No one's going anywhere.'

'Maybe we can keep it. Had some fun times in there.'

'Eww...TMI.'

'Mom and Dad probably fucked in there too.'

'Ok, pervert.'

'I wonder if my joint is still under the back seat,' I said.

'It's not...I know,' she replied.

'Uh...well, well...I guess you owe me then.'

'Maybe...someday.'

It was nice having that; it felt like a scaffold that stopped a heavy fall. But soon I noticed the film of fear and despair in my sister's eyes. Something had shifted inside of her. Whereas before, there was an equation that solved everything, a maxim or a formulary that collected random matter into logical patterns, elements that without fail followed the laws of order and entropy, our parents' death had introduced some unknown variable, so forceful and electric that the rest were rendered meaningless. Everything she'd known until then was a theorem, whereas what was happening now was incontrovertible, lawless truth.

Over a few weeks, as we adjusted to the reality that both of our parents were dead, as the stillness of the outside penetrated everything, she became more agitated, a lot like the anxious

mockingbirds in the video. I thought that she was just bereaved, until one day she called to say that she thought she was pregnant.

‘How could you be pregnant? When last did you have sex?’

Nobody was having sex. It had been a while since I’d even managed to feel someone else’s skin, by accident when I collected my change from the supermarket cashier. She died a few weeks later, and the supermarkets closed altogether a few months ago, under order that we all make do with rations delivered by soldiers.

‘I think like six months ago, with that guy from the airline.’

She’d tried for about six months to get a refund on a cancelled flight, holding for hours whether she called at six in the morning or at midnight. So eventually, with the unbridled rage that comes from being disgruntled by bad customer service, she went to their office, readied for a fight. She never got her refund, just a quick fuck and a voucher for future travel.

‘If you were pregnant, wouldn’t you know by now?’

‘Then how do you explain this?’ she asked, pointing the phone at her slightly protruding belly. I was certain it was a pseudocyesis, and I tried to convince her of it, but she was obstinate. They’d told us that the virus caused delusions, so I wasn’t sure what to think about the ‘baby’. Maybe she did have the virus, or maybe the swelling in her belly, with its rubbery marks and its ridged indents, was a good place to deposit her pain.

So I humoured her, as her belly grew incomprehensibly larger, as she waddled on her small legs with her hands behind her back, as she caressed her belly like she was cradling it every time she sat down or stood up.

‘When’s the baby due?’

‘I have no idea, but I keep thinking I feel contractions, so probably soon.’

I even started to wonder if, in fact, she was pregnant and I was the one who was going mad, so I left little notes to myself

in case one day I went completely through the looking glass and couldn't remember anything. On little pieces of untidily torn yellow paper, I wrote passwords for email and bank accounts, and I drafted a few messages to send to people automatically in case the virus killed me or I killed myself.

'Dear C,' I wrote to my ex, 'sorry for all the shithead things I did. I think you deserved better, but it always seemed to me that you didn't think you deserved better. I hope you have a happy life.'

'Dear M,' I wrote to my old office mate, 'I always loved you. I just never knew how to tell you. I hope you have a happy life.'

They're back in my Drafts folder, because I cancelled their sending when I knew for certain that it was my sister who was mad, or at least maddening. Pre-empting her descent, like Virginia Woolf, she ran to her lab one spring night, braving the virus, and swallowed a mound of potassium permanganate.

She sent me a video note, in which I could see her mouth already ulcerating. She told me that it would be the last I'd see of her, that her insides would slowly erode and induce shock if her kidneys didn't fail first. I didn't try to call her, because she said she wouldn't pick up, so I listened as she told me about her collection of necklace charms, about the pin code to her ATM card and about her retirement plan, for which I was now the sole beneficiary. She never mentioned her pregnancy, and her hands weren't lingering maternally on her abdomen, so I wasn't sure if she was still convinced of it or not.

I didn't see my sister's last breaths, just the apologetic precursor, filled with what seemed like guilt and possibly some unvoiced regret. By then, it was too late, as nobody would be coming to save her from her decision. My first reaction was to be angry at her, to wonder why she couldn't reconcile to this new reality, a reality that I was facing too, so I watched her blabbering video repeatedly and spat expletives at her, calling her selfish and cowardly. At that time, it felt like maybe my

capacity for grief had been depleted, that rage was an emotion that was much more available to me.

My cursing punctuated the silence for a few days. I glared at the empty squares, like embers that had burnt out, and curled into myself on the sofa when the anger ceded into sadness. Eventually, after having not moved from my two-day old moon position for a while, a feeling of what I can only describe as relief, maybe freedom, coupled of course with some shame, washed over me like a windswept wave.

I sat up to eat an orange, cutting it into quarters that I could sink my teeth into, watching the juice bleed out onto the plate like acid raindrops. Slowly exonerating myself from my shame, I chewed on my slice of orange, let it linger on my tongue while I thought about what I'd known before and how much it had changed.

This new way was all so singular and so precise that I had no reason to contemplate anymore; nothing in my life required opinion or erudition. The complexities of love, sex, humour and loss, they were no longer wrought with questioning. There was just the sour taste in my mouth, the liquid that splashed as it rushed down my throat, and the placid air outside.

The soft breeze seemed so inviting that I felt I needed to open the glass door, that in lieu of travelling to Kizimkazi or the Càn Giò or Iguazu, I could stand on the balcony and feel a ripple of danger and excitement and liberty. I took the last few bites of the orange and left the peel, with some shards of bristly pulp, on the plate. I opened the door.

Faraaz Mahomed

Faraaz is a clinical psychologist and human rights researcher, based in New York, but originally from South Africa. He has written several short stories and travel pieces, and his work has

appeared in *Granta*, *Adda* and the *Sunday Times*. In 2016, he won the *Commonwealth Short Story Prize* for the African region and in 2020, he was longlisted for the *Bristol Short Story Prize*. He is an avid reader, writer and coffee drinker.

Seven

Short Story Competition Runner-up

My watch screams at me. Can't be late. But after seven steps onto solid paving slabs, avoiding their dark edges and spider-web cracks, I have to stop. Looking at the heavens, I plead: 'Please, don't let me come to harm. No bolts from the blue. No tornadoes whipping me skyward. No planes hurtling down. Please...keep me safe.'

Another seven strides along the city centre street, my ankle boots clomping reassuringly as heels meet terra firma. I halt again. Stare at oil-slick black tarmac. Whisper: 'Please, don't let anything hurt me. Nothing to send me sprawling. Nothing to drag me down. Nothing to make me sink. Please...no sticks or stones or broken bones.'

Fourteen precisely placed footsteps are one complete set that obeys The Law. Strangers will be staring. In the days when I glanced up, some appeared to have tasted something foul, some as if they'd witnessed comedy gold and some crossed to the other side. I resent the day cameras crept inside mobile phones as, occasionally, a little red light shines from a casually-held device and The Law is captured to garner limitless views and cruel comments.

But no matter where I go or what I do, there's someone I can't ignore. Someone who tries to control me. Someone who tries to drag me back. He is the chimpanzee residing in my brain's darkest recesses. He demands constant attention, tossing fears around my cortex. *That stranger by the cashpoint is watching you...he fills my mind with worries. Now he's following you...*

A prickling sensation crawls up my arm. As I ignore the stranger's presence, it intensifies. I wait for the man to wander off. Just in case. *What if he's a knifeman waiting round the corner to slice you into sushi?* But I can't stand here forever!

Anyway, this journey doesn't involve the chimp because it's an affair of the heart. I'll divert him with memories of how I got here.

My first love was innocent. Sweet messages scribbled in red ink onto lined notepaper, folded into segments and passed between sticky palms. Handholding before I sensed germs. Snogging behind the bike sheds as if an endurance sport. Peter entered my life before the chimp took hold, when I was young, free and normal. It lasted barely a spring term. The recollections are worn now, like a Verona statue rubbed away by lovelorn tourists.

I complete the next seven steps, floral summer dress swaying around my bare legs, and begin The Law. Glass-fronted monstrosities stretch into blue sky, sunshine glinting off the glaze.

Left, right, left, right, left, right, left.

I fulfil The Law. Well-heeled Louboutins, comfortable Clarks and scuffed Nikes stream past. Prams and wheeled suitcases are regular hazards. The good thing about being so observant of my steps is that I've never trodden in dog muck. But I've lost count of the amount of people I've crashed into.

The Law has protected me for a decade. I created it as a spindly teenager following a lengthy hospital spell after disregarding an intensifying headache and nausea. *What's that dull throb behind your temple?* Didn't even realise my rising temperature and aversion to brightness were warnings of an infection snaking up my spinal cord and roaming my membranes. *What if it's returning?* Sweet sixteen, what did I know about illnesses and symptoms? *Probably caught it from all that snogging.* And the tell-tale rash never developed, even if the iron-stiff neck did. Wasn't 'til I woke up in that hospital bed,

days later, surrounded by bleeping machines, that I realised I'd been violated by a potential killer. *Don't risk ending up there again.* When I was finally allowed to leave – a pale, emaciated hunchback hobbling down the corridor – they said I'd been lucky, could have been much worse, there'd be no permanent damage. *What did they know?*

The chimp laughs, a sound like screeching brakes. *Go see a doctor. Now!* I throw him a morsel of the past instead.

My second love was naïve. Gary never knew about the primate developing in my head. The tics and traits were infrequent and infantile then, much easier to cover. When the chimp emerged, I dumped Gary so that he'd never find out.

During the next fourteen steps and citation, I skirt around a clipboard-wielding salesman. This city is a maze of rats all trying to find their way out. I moved here to be close to everything. But everything is too close. *All that spit and sweat and stink.* I dream of a rural retreat away from office blocks, shops and beady eyes. *Think of the bacteria.*

It was much later that I discovered meningitis was the spark but not the seed of my condition. Never knew my dad, but apparently he had it, and his father before him. It can run like that, each generation passing the baton of burden onto the next.

My mobile buzzes. **Where R U?**

The chimp swings around my head searching for trouble. *Did you lock the door?* He's a tireless puppeteer pulling me backwards whenever I try to move on. *Can you remember actually turning the key?* Whatever answers I throw back hit a brick wall and slide from the surface. *What if the key didn't work properly?* I definitely locked the door because I've already been

back to check. *If the door's open, who's got in?* I can't return a second time.

I concentrate on something else.

My third love was sympathetic. This time I was honest from the start. Steve listened long into the night as our relationship progressed. But his reassurances goaded the chimp.

Sat on a park bench on an autumn day.

'I've left the oven on.' The chimp nodded furiously.

'Pretty sure you didn't,' soothed Steve.

How's he know? He didn't even step foot in the kitchen.

'We'd better go back.' A twenty-minute walk. We'd get there before it burst into flames.

'There's no need.'

'For Christ's sake, Steve, something could catch fire!'

A chill wind strengthened. I huddled into my coat.

'That's not likely, is it?' No variance in his tone, not a hint of annoyance. But the chimp's that song you hate, playing again and again in your head, with Steve inadvertently feeding coins into the mental jukebox.

'But it *could* happen.'

'It's just your illness talking, honey.' He called it that, as if it's a bug.

Suddenly, despite the cold, I could feel the heat and stench from all my possessions burning into blackness. The chimp was chattering so fast I feared my brain would explode.

'I can't sit here while my home burns down,' I yelled, rising.

Steve scampered after me as I clomped in a series of stuttering sevens. Around us, falling leaves scattered across the vast, empty space.

I march onwards, pausing only for more mental hiccups. The Law makes walking slow and cumbersome but ensures I get there safely. Having meals out isn't easy but the dating world demands it. At one point the chimp developed an obsession with choking and I'd only eat soup. Dates never got past the starter.

And it can take me forever to prepare. I've been known to shower seven times, an entire morning abandoned to routine. I've lost so many hours repeating things over and over and over, a soundtrack of my worst thoughts becoming a stuck record unable to slip into the next groove.

The sunlight's waning. I check my watch. If I don't get there soon, everything will be ruined. The chimp grows restless. *Did you leave the heating on?* I calm him with another pacifier.

My fourth love was special. When I first saw Craig, waiting at a bus stop, the chimp went quiet. All those chaotic thoughts stilled, then vanished. I wasn't used to silence. Even lying in bed waiting for sleep, the chimp chatters away. *Did you turn the tap off?* He has no off-switch. But it was as if Craig had somehow muzzled him.

For a moment, I knew serenity.

When Craig shyly agreed to go out, the hush remained. And on the ensuing dates. I felt...normal.

Craig asked me to move in with him. Even then he wasn't fazed. He found being kissed seven times upon waking adorable. He quipped how no-one would ever sneak in to rob us as I'd definitely locked the front door after checking it seven times. He described the moment I turned off the lamp as a 'bedtime disco'.

Then he began leaving in a morning before I'd finished kissing him, saying I was making him late for work. He'd huff as I leapt out of bed and trundled downstairs to test the handle. Click, click, click. The strobe effect was hurting his eyes. Click, click, click. Giving him a migraine. Click. Lights out.

Turns out cute quirks become ugly constants. Craig took to sleeping over at a friend's, then said moving in together was a mistake. The distance grew until we were over.

But he was all I could think of, the first handsome thing I got stuck on. I obsessed about who was now kissing him, picturing their prettiness. And how they were doing it all wrong, only kissing him once. The chimp weighed on my chest but I didn't care. I wanted Craig back so bad that I left the door unlocked, left the lights ablaze, left the oven on.

He didn't return.

I stayed indoors for days. Just wanted to sleep and not wake up. I hoped the whole damn building would collapse on me. Even left the gas on to speed up the process. The chimp insisted I turn it off with his incessant reminders. Eventually, 'life' carried on. And however safe solitude is, no woman is an island.

Squealing brakes and blaring horns drag me back to my journey. By crossing the road I can take a shortcut down an alleyway, but a steady stream of cars makes it difficult to venture out. A bus rumbles past so close to the kerb I step back and now there's just six steps left before The Law. The traffic flow increases in a fog of fumes until the vehicles are almost bumper to bumper. I imagine one losing control and hurtling up the pavement, flinging me across bonnet and roof in a broken-limbed sprawl. Then car piling into car endlessly until I'm crushed in the middle of a squeezed metal concertina.

I decide not to cross.

I'll use the traffic lights further up. Darkness is developing. I'm going to be really late. Another set of seven. Another recitation. The chimp sits there with a toothy smirk, then scratches an itch. *Did you leave the iron on as well?* He's hungry for attention so I chuck him another reminiscence.

My fifth love was controlling. Dan tried to manage me, taming the chimp becoming his pet project. Thought he knew how to handle it. Thought he knew best. The chimp had other ideas.

Should have known that evening was going to be a disaster when a broken flagstone stopped me in my tracks. Dan carried straight on, shouting at me to catch-up. And as soon as we sat down in the restaurant it became obvious: a smear-stained butter knife, residue blemishing a fork prong. A vibration in my chest felt as if the chimp had slipped down to hum in there.

‘Leave it,’ ordered Dan, hunched in his chair. ‘They’re fine.’

No matter how many times you align things, you can’t hide ruin.

I asked the waiter for clean cutlery. He positioned polished replacements onto my napkin. But I swear he looked at me strangely. My chest tightened until my breathing became shallow.

Dan shook his head as if I’d asked for world peace.

‘Embarrassing,’ he hissed. ‘Nothing wrong with ‘em.’

I could hardly hear him over the chimp telling me the new cutlery looked even worse. *Kitchen must be filthy.* My throat was closing.

By the time our spaghetti Bolognese arrived, any appetite had gone. All I saw were worms wallowing in mud.

‘Tuck in,’ said Dan, sucking up a wriggler. ‘It’ll get cold.’

I couldn’t even touch my knife and fork. The waiter perched nearby, eyes analysing. *He’ll think you’ve got an eating disorder.* Dizziness descended.

Like the spaghetti, Dan’s face lost all rigidity.

‘Costs a fortune to eat here,’ he growled. ‘At least try the food.’

The waiter brought me a glass of water with a cold smile. The chimp screeched. *He's scooped it out the loo! Just because you asked him for a clean knife.*

Between glares, Dan shovelled forkfuls of livid worms into his mouth.

We were supposed to be Lady and the Tramp. But I knew I'd never kiss him again, not after seeing those mushed maggots tumbling inside his mouth as he muttered how 'fucking ungrateful' I was, and was 'only doing it to spite him.' I tried to dodge flecks of food and spittle while wondering how soon I'd be able to shower.

The green man flashes invitingly. I ensure every vehicle is stationary before crossing in seven long strides. My eyes are magnifying glasses picking up potential dangers. Should probably work for the Health and Safety Executive, but I settled into an accountancy role, somehow covering the chimp's worst excesses for years by getting to the office early at 7am and learning to disguise it. My colleagues were surprisingly sympathetic when I confessed.

Back on safer pavement, I'm nearly there. I recite The Law, then entertain the chimp with another memory.

My sixth love was cruel. I presumed Dave charming. It was a mask. I should have understood that you never really know what's going on underneath. To my shame, I stayed with him too long. I hadn't been able to meet anyone for a long time and when you've fallen so low you don't always grasp that you deserve to climb higher.

Dave was all compliments and manners until he got me into bed. Then thunder and lightning replaced sunny smiles and a

warm outlook. He rumbled with gloom, crackled with sparks of anger. The chimp twitched at the uncertainty.

Dave nicknamed me ‘Seven’. He enjoyed playing tricks. He’d click the light switch in mock repetition or install a blown bulb so that I was met with darkness and panic rather than illumination. He’d count between steps to put me off my stride and occasionally tried to trip me so that my worst fears would be realised. The chimp became a banshee. Dave never realised that I was more scared of not completing a seven than of him. But then nobody can see the bully inside my head.

Still, he made me feel like a piece of crap surrounded by flies that no matter how much I swatted them the buggers kept buzzing back. Perhaps my inadequacies made him feel better about himself. I’m grateful though. Because, after him, I vowed never to feel that bad again. And I became determined not to give up.

After Dave, I finally visited a doctor, who prescribed me antidepressants and cognitive behavioral therapy. They don’t get rid of the chimp or my dependency on The Law. But I came up with distracting the chimp by focusing on something else, like these boyfriends, even if none lasted more than a few months. And you can learn so much, going back over your mistakes.

At last, I’ve reached the restaurant. I quickly recite The Law. Entering, I breathe a sigh of relief: John’s still seated at a table.

And within seven steps.

I mumble an apology for being so late. ‘Wasn’t sure I’d locked the door.’

John leans back in his chair and grins. Heard it all before.

‘What’s worst that could have happened, Chloe?’ he asks.

The chimp says nothing.

‘My vinyl collection of Motown classics stolen?’

‘Nowt we couldn’t replace.’

‘Even the seven-inch signed by Marvin Gaye?’

‘Just a scribble on a sleeve.’ He laughs. ‘You’re way more precious.’

It’s cheesier than Wensleydale but the way he smiles makes me believe him. I love to watch his mouth when he speaks and the way the hairpin curve lips move around the words. When he says he loves me his mouth arcs up at the edges.

Cutlery is neatly aligned on my napkin, next to an unopened bottle of water. The menu’s on the other side, rather than dirtying my plate.

The first time I saw John, in a crowded pub, the chimp fell mute, lightning striking twice. I had to talk to him, then asked him out seven times in thirty seconds. He said yes after the second one but that didn’t feel right so I kept asking and he said yes again on the seventh and that felt much better. On our first date I spent more time organising the cutlery than eating or talking but he didn’t mind. When we held hands, I didn’t have to wash mine afterwards. He loved the seven kisses goodbye. Even more so the seven kisses in the morning.

I gaze at his symmetrical face, blonde curls, sweeping eyelashes, square jawline, sweet dimples, soft lips and those eyes, those blue eyes, those deep blue eyes, deep blue eyes, deep blue eyes, deep blue eyes, deep blue eyes. They follow mine. They don’t scrutinise me; they read me. He knows when I’m exhausted by the chimp and will take us to a calmer place or give me space.

‘I’ve a surprise for you, Chloe.’

The chimp breaks his restraint with a squeal. I frown. John knows I don’t like surprises.

‘That week in country cottage, away from everything...I’ve booked it.’

John tilts forward and kisses my cheek. ‘Happy first anniversary, sweetheart.’

A year now and he still hasn’t tired of me or the chimp.

I beam.

My seventh love is perfect.

Richard Hooton

Born and brought up in Mansfield, Nottinghamshire, Richard studied English Literature at the University of Wolverhampton before becoming a journalist and communications officer. He has had several short stories published and has been listed in and won various competitions. He now lives in Mossley, near Manchester.

Born Standing

‘In the name of the father, the son, and the holy spirit, I name this child Agrafena,’ said the priest, as he repeatedly submerged the baby girl in a basin of water, at the back of the church. Agrafena means ‘born feet first’, as indeed she had been, in the year 1900, in the village of Tambov, near Moscow. Her mother died during the birth.

Her father, Viktor, could not afford to take time out from his work to care for the baby. He lived with his mother, as many of the villagers did, and they were able to look after her, until she was old enough to hold a sickle and go to work herself. She enjoyed working with her father, though the work was tough, and the hours were long. They would sing folk songs and give names to the little birds that darted in and out of sight, plucking insects and worms from the ground as the two workers disturbed the hard soil, tending to the grain fields. Agrafena and the other children working nearby would often stop to play together, which made Viktor angry.

‘Stop that, now!’ he would shout, ‘or I shall find a stick to beat you with,’ which he never would have done. He would have to shout about three or four times before Agrafena would get back to her work. By the third time, Viktor’s voice would strain as he made his threat, and his thin, tired face looked even sadder than usual. Agrafena would then feel bad, for even at the age of five she understood how desperate their situation was.

For the first few years, Viktor never asked his daughter to tend the fields during the harsh winter months. She would, instead, spend time with her grandmother, who taught her to sew, and cook, and make countless traditional wooden spoons with her. Agrafena, or Fenya, as she came to be known, marvelled how her grandmother could make so many spoons each day. Every morning she would collect a tree branch, and

every evening the branch would have turned into at least five, perfectly formed spoons and a huge pile of shavings and sawdust. She would give them to a neighbour, who set out every week with his horse and cart full of wooden spoons, made by the villagers, to sell in Moscow.

Although they couldn't afford to take time off from work, Fenya's family went to church every week, without fail, as did every other family in the village. They spent an hour, every evening, after eating whatever meagre meal the grandmother managed to scrape together, paying their respects to the 'little father' in his Winter Palace, and giving thanks to God for providing them with a meal.

Fenya enjoyed hearing her grandmother talking about stories from her own childhood, before the emancipation, when serfdom was commonplace.

'Freedom,' her grandmother would laugh, 'that's what we called it. Everyone did. We were thrilled to have the opportunity to make our own money, and not *belong* to anybody. Ha! Look at us now. I used to enjoy seeing Baron Ivanov prancing about on his grand horse. He wore such beautiful clothes, you know. Now, it's these spoons that own me, and the fields that own you and your father. Ah, well, if that is God's will, then we must be grateful.' She would always make the sign of the cross, on her chest, when she mentioned God.

Fenya never forgot the conversations she had with her grandmother. She died, when Fenya was just ten years old, and she missed her dearly. After her grandmother's death, Fenya began to question Viktor more and more about the 'little father'. The village had heard rumours of 'Bloody Sunday', a peaceful protest at the Winter Palace that had turned into a massacre, although nobody really believed it or ever talked about it. Nobody in Tambov knew any family that had been affected by the massacre, and their love for the Tsar seemed as strong as it had always been.

‘Why must we honour him so, father, what is he to do with us?’

‘Because he, and the Tsars before him have been chosen to lead us, by God himself.’

‘But why? What does he do for us? Why do we need him, if God is our father?’

‘He keeps us safe. He looks after us.’

‘But he doesn’t! You give him money and grain every week, just to add to the piles of wealth and food that he probably sleeps on—’

‘Mind your tongue, young lady! He is God’s chosen. He keeps us safe. There are enemies at Mother Russia’s doorstep, barbaric enemies, heathens, that worship false gods. The Tsar is always busy with negotiations, politics, treaties, and when all else fails, war. It is because of him that we can live as we do and give our thanks to God. We might not have wealth, but don’t forget that Jesus didn’t either, and he suffered in life just as we do. We have the chance to earn our place in Paradise, so we must be grateful to the Tsar that we don’t live under heathen rule.’

‘Yes, father.’

Fenya’s questioning would usually end this way, though the look in her eyes was not one of satisfaction.

When Fenya was fifteen, Viktor was called into military service. All the men in Tambov were forced into the military reserve, as standard, and had been for as long as anybody could remember. Occasionally, some were called into active service, but until 1914 this had not been a regular occurrence for the village. Viktor was setting traps for the rats around their store of grain, while Fenya was mending a hole that had been chewed in one of the grain sacks, when there was a knock at the door.

A stern looking soldier stood in the dim twilight of the evening. In his thick, black leather boots which were worn with age, he stepped over the threshold into Fenya’s home. He wore a heavy looking overcoat, which was dull, and greenish grey in

colour, and had a large furry collar. A big leather belt was wrapped tightly around his portly waist, making his chest puff out. A golden, shiny hilted sabre hung from the belt in its polished scabbard on which he rested a black, leather-gloved hand. With his other hand he removed the officer's peaked cap from his head, revealing his greying blonde hair, with a receding hairline, that looked remarkably neat for having spent what must have been hours under the cap, judging by the red line across his forehead. His thick moustache jiggled about as he said a few quiet words to Viktor before handing him a note. As he read it, the soldier waited patiently in the doorway with his arms folded. He looked briefly at Fenya and nodded, without smiling. She knew as soon as her father opened the door what was happening. She didn't reciprocate the soldier's acknowledgement, but instead looked from him to her father, then back to him and back to her father. Other than her eyes, every part of her body was frozen, and tense. Viktor barely read the note but stared at it for some time. Eventually, he looked up, not at the soldier, but at Fenya. His eyes were glistening, and the corners of his quivering mouth were turned down.

Within ten minutes, Viktor was standing in the doorway, wearing his winter clothes and a rudimentary knapsack on his back, kissing Fenya over and over again. Through her sobbing, Fenya heard her father say to her:

'Listen, my dear. Whoever we are fighting, you can be sure that God is on our side. Keep my bed clean and warm for me, would you? I'm sure I'll need it again soon.'

Viktor smiled as he said this, but not with his eyes. Then, accompanying the officer and six other nervous men, Viktor marched out of the village, into the vast, cold darkness of the Russian evening.

That was the last Fenya ever heard or saw of her father. She never knew his fate, of which she was somewhat surprisingly glad.

The next few years were hard. More than once, she had to plead with the landowner to be lenient with her about the rent, which she barely managed to pay. She worked the fields by day, and spent her evenings crafting wooden spoons. She was having to sell more grain now, to pay for her rent and taxes, and often had to beg for food from her neighbours, who had little to spare themselves.

Out of desperation, not love, she married a local man who was over twice her age. He asked the landowner for permission to wed her, and because they were from the same village, permission was granted. They were married in March 1916. Tradition forced her to move out of her family home, and into his. Both his parents were dead, as was his first wife, so he lived alone. Before long, she became pregnant.

Their baby girl was born in the December, and Fenya struggled to look after her. With no other family to help them, Fenya was unable to work. Her husband did not deal well with the situation, and Fenya was often limping, with bruises on her cheeks. She despised herself for the relief that she felt when the baby died later that winter, due to the cold and malnutrition. Her husband's house was not as easy to keep warm as Fenya's family home had been, and the crops did not grow well in 1916. Starvation took many lives, that winter.

A month after they lost their child, and not long after the village had celebrated the new year, Fenya's husband began vomiting, and suffered badly from diarrhoea and muscle cramps. His health degenerated rapidly. He was buried on the same day as three other villagers who had also died from cholera, in the church grounds that were frozen solid. Fenya didn't make any spoons that evening, which she spent at his graveside. Her tears were not for him.

During August 1917, seventeen-year-old Agrafena made the most difficult decision of her life.

The village had not spent as much time thanking their ‘little father’ as they used to. Rumours were spreading rapidly of civil unrest, riots, mutinies and of previously secret organisations now publicly protesting the rule of their once loved Tsar. Many people had already left the village, either to find work in Moscow’s growing number of factories or to join in with the violent protests. For some time, Fenya had been interested in the men’s chatter about a political group known as the Bolsheviks, and a man called Vladimir Lenin, who had recently returned from exile to lead them.

Fenya’s broken heart felt utterly empty, as she left her village with a handful of men and women, both young and old, and walked the long road to revolution. She no longer cared what fate awaited her.

As she looked up at the deep, red sky that silhouetted the giant buildings of Moscow, which seemed so aptly to mirror Fenya’s anger and despair, the cool evening breeze whispered a faint glimmer of hope, hope that she might soon find a life worth living.

Ed James

Especially after spending a few years living out of a backpack in various parts of the world, Ed James has an interest in different cultures and their history. He completed a BA in Creative Writing and English Language in 2020, and hopes to achieve publishing success in the years to come.

And the Stone Rolls On

‘How do you like your band, Charlie?’

How do I like my band? Do I like boys who are always late? Do I like rehearsal spaces that smell like sweat and beer? There is no Zeppelinesque, shared-initials chemistry between any of us, but what can you ask for in this day and age?

‘You see, great men do well in bands. Great women – not so much. Look at history. The most talented women out there created brands of their own.’ Right. It’s also because we live in an age of brands, not bands.

‘Yeah. They also shared a drug of choice.’

‘Well, it’s a small price to pay.’

‘For what?’

‘For the world.’

He moves the folder towards me. ‘At least look at it. It’s a perfect business plan, ideal for someone like you. You’re exactly what we’re looking for. A breath of fresh air, an inevitable tragedy. You really do have a gift.’ He pauses whilst taking a hit. Menthol. Not very rock ‘n’ roll, but now that I’m here, it’s pretty clear rock ‘n’ roll is only another invention. ‘And, of course, the contract is valid for seven years from now.’

My own personal universe to create and control in seven years. Like God. Will I get a rest day, too? But no, the last year is the one in which everything falls apart. People run away from psychiatric hospitals and lose their flesh.

I grab the folder. ‘I’ll think about it.’ My hands are trembling, and I can’t tell whether it’s fear or excitement. Then again, the human body doesn’t know the difference.

I walk back home, headphones on, as a rule. It's become a habit more than anything else. I can't tell whether the vertigo is caused by the vibrations or, well, the vibrations.

Can anyone identify me? Am I recognizable yet?

I'm holding a piece of paper that could decide upon my future. Upon the future of humanity, some might say. The guy across from me, on the other side of the road, waiting for the green light, with his headphones on. What is he listening to? Whom is he mourning? Whose overdose caused his eyes to swell?

Do icons exist these days? Does anyone have the time for them? Can anyone hold anything sacred within their attention span for longer than five minutes? One dies, five people starve – and while they starve, the forest gets caught on fire. And then a musician gets suicided. And all humankind stops and drops everything for a second, because, never mind the forests, our own archetype has fallen. David's dick has crumbled apart, too. We can't control anything: not art works, and certainly not the networks operating across the chords and contracts, clapping and jumping, interviewing and lying.

Rotten Apple. Haven't changed it for years now. Staley was not a part of it, though. I guess each movement has space for one icon only, and the rest wither at their own time.

'Hello?'

'Change of plans. The interview is today, in thirty minutes. Will you make it?'

No, I won't. And now I will be the one classified as disrespectful and disorganised. Never mind the boys, never mind the band. I am the brand.

'I'll do my best.'

‘So, you’ve just finished your first tour. Exciting, isn’t it?’ A woman. Young and excited, surely new at this. Like me. Whose soul did she sell to maintain her conviction of the industry?

‘Yeah. I mean—’ I haven’t slept properly in days, and I’m pretty sure my manager hates me, because of my total neglect for the perfectly curated post-gig networking shots. But, ‘it sure is. Exhausting, but there’s always a price, I suppose.’ No, that’s too soon. The contract says, Do not be morbid until two years before, or something of such sort. If you’re too dark for too long, people get bored. And then one’s disappearance is nothing but a technicality. So I smile, as an add-in.

‘Tell me about your upcoming album,’ she says, while looking at her dishevelled notes. I suppose it was not up to her to have the interview now. ‘You launched an EP without a label, and it’s been a huge success. And now there’s a rumor going around that it attracted the attention of,’ she raises her eyebrows, ‘the right people.’

‘What do you mean, the right people?’ I know exactly what she means, but I hate the way she said it. The right people? Assisted suicide in the making, that’s what it is. But it is my choice in the end, so I shouldn’t be complaining.

‘Well, you know, that you’ve got some pretty big record deal prospects ahead of you.’

‘Yeah, well, I guess that’s – correct.’ I’m terrible at this. ‘Wait, no, I’m sorry, can you scratch that? I’m not supposed to talk about it yet. It’s all in the making, really. For the article, can you just say the regular thing, that we’ve got exciting plans and news, that things are moving forward, and happening, and all that?’

‘You are able to confirm that you’re working on an album, though. Is that correct?’ She did not verify that she wouldn’t use what I had said in the article.

‘Yes.’ The contract says it all: three albums. One rough around the edges, one that changes everything, and one that is

established and mature enough, so that people's awe reaches momentum – until it all breaks down. 'Yeah, we're probably going to take a bit of a rest, and then we'll most likely start recording.' Another smile.

Each of her questions hits my earlobes like a ray of sunshine sweeping one's darkened senses. I'm ruining it for her. She has nothing to work with here.

The last question makes me want to laugh. 'Where do you see yourself, and your band, in five years?' Where are we, in some university-based career-inspiration fair?

I can't help but smirk. The contract says it all. Working on our – my – last record. Bass line expanding, moving further downhill. Time for my own drug of choice (at least there's some freedom in it). If I don't have a partner at that time, they'll find me one, so that I can ruin them as well. Another musician, most likely, or a writer. Maybe an artist, like – Mapplethorpe? But no, in their case the female was the functional one. I need a template for my own spiral into hysteria.

'Hopefully, still being able to do that,' I say. 'On our own terms,' I add after a while, but, at that moment, I already know it won't be true.

'Okay.' I barge in, my own terms in hand. 'Let's do it. But I have conditions.'

'They always do,' he says triumphantly. A Robin Hood of the music industry. Striking the abundant to manipulate the masses. It's more of a warped version of the tale, but reality always is. 'So?' he asks. 'Do tell.'

I hand him the folder. 'First thing: it will happen on May 18th.' He's silent. 'It's because—'

‘Don’t bother, I know why,’ he says, while skimming my future. ‘CC? Isn’t that a bit too obvious? And what will you change your name to? Charlie Chaplin?’

‘Listen. People love fate. They love a good story, a good connection. It freaks them out just enough to shake them out of their nihilism. Cornell, Curtis, May 18th. It all fits together, and I know this better than anyone. My entire life was based around those connections, and that’s also the reason why I’m here today, we both know that.’

‘All right, all right. We’ll think of the name later. So, May 18th, new stage name. Keep in mind that the people you mentioned do not fit into the model we’re going for. You do know that, right?’

‘I do. But those are still my conditions.’

‘What else?’ He tosses the folder on his desk and looks at me intently.

I feel more uncertain with each word. Maybe this is a bad idea. ‘If I’m going to be a – you know – let’s not follow the rest in terms of, um, image. We can forgive him, he had stomach cramps, he didn’t have a choice, but the whole body image industry these days needs new role models. It doesn’t need any more bulimics either.’

‘Better role models? You’re going to kill yourself. What else is there to say?’

‘Who said I’m going to kill myself?’

‘Oh, honey. You will. Of course you will. You won’t make it in this business. Not that it’s a problem, on the contrary, that’s what we’re going for, we’re flowing along with the usual narrative. The plan is designed meticulously, it has all the lows and the breakdowns, and the breakups, and the moments everything starts to disintegrate. It will go according to plan. And you will make sure of that.’

‘But why does it have to mean suicide?’ I ask. ‘There are other ways.’

‘Well, most of them are taken. We had way too many overdoses. We had heroin, alcohol, vomit-choking. And that one suicide from two decades ago had an overdose alongside it anyway. Then we had bathtubs and swimming pools, so the drowning narrative is taken as well.

‘Natural causes are not in the picture, cancer is boring, car accidents are for ordinary people. What else would you propose? A murder? Then the attention would not be on you, but on the one who did it. I mean, look at John Lennon, his killer is almost as famous as he is. No, there’s no other way. You’ve got your seven years, you can do it as creatively as you want, but there’s really no other option there.’

‘And what if I don’t do it? What if it happens earlier?’

‘I know you. I know the likes of you. Plus, if you sign the contract, it will happen at that time, whether you want it or not. If you don’t do it yourself, someone else will do it for you. Which means you’ve either got seven precious years, or less. And you won’t take less. You’d rather have the glory than the freedom.’

‘And how do you know that?’

‘You’re here, aren’t you? You’re not looking for a life. You’re looking for an afterlife.’ Like fucking Beowulf.

I stand up and saunter around the walls. The sparkling vinyls, the awards, the signed photos. All of it feels translucent now. ‘So, none of it’s real? None of their experiences are real? It was all orchestrated?’

‘We are real. We make this happen. It’s not some fickle fate feeding into people’s psyches. It is all us. We create fate.’

‘You mean, all of those people who sacrificed their lives, and then all of you,’ I point at the picture on his desk, ‘sitting comfortably?’

‘We’ve never forced anyone to do anything. We only send out invitations. I see human beings, artists, with a potential to

change the world. But you can only change the world in a number of ways.’ A number of deaths.

‘Right.’ I sit back down.

I see life. The useless ordinary I’d never been able to grasp. No, I do not belong here. I either stay invisible, a day-to-day shadow hanging around rootlessly, or I embody everything.

I’ve never been a member of any club. This might be my only chance.

‘So, when do we start?’

Alex Blank

Alex has been experimenting with various forms of writing for the past few years. She is a culture & lifestyle editor and writer for *Roar News*, and her work has also appeared in publications such as *HuffPost UK*, *Bad Pony Mag* and *Heliopause Magazine*. She is also a creator of the YouTube channel, *Alex Blank*, where she explores the themes of identity, self-understanding and how to lead a more substantial life.

Did I do Something Wrong?

Bryce stood in the corner of the banquet hall, tapping a finger against her chin as she watched King Henry VIII make grand statements to those closest. His arms swept wide as he boasted about his recent tennis match, a little fact that Bryce's researchers were proud of finding, and one that Bryce just had to include.

Henry turned the conversation to matters of jousting, a monologue Bryce had read countless times in order to balance fact and character. Consistency, it created the illusion of life. Bryce judged the details on the table. Spit-roast meat, whole roasted peacock, a bowl of internal organs served with vinegar, a chunk of whale meat, all food one could find in 1536. The textures were excellent; she could almost smell the juicy meats. She'd have to buy the art department a box of doughnuts. The simulation was near completion.

Bryce stared at the King's hand. Her jaw tensed.

'Terry, why the hell does Henry have a fork?'

'Come again?' crackled a voice in her ear.

'Forks, Terry, came about in the Italian renaissance. Near the end of the 16th century. In fact, I'm noticing a lot of forks. I count—' She muttered under her breath, '—six, Terry.'

'We have time to edit them out.'

'A *month*, Terry, we have a month. Give the job to whoever put them in. If they aren't deleted and polished within the week dock their pay.'

'Already sending the emails.'

'Good.'

Fuck the doughnuts.

She walked the length of the lavish hall until she was standing behind Henry. These Sims weren't programmed to respond. Anyone else would have felt like a ghost among them, but Bryce

saw them for what they were – virtual puppets. She leaned a little too close, and her hand slid through Henry’s arm. The doll didn’t respond, but the particles in his arm momentarily displaced around her hand, like smoke, before reforming.

Luckily, when the museum received the data files for their V.R room, they’d put up barriers to stop guests fondling the Sims.

Something white flitted past her eye to the window.

The movement was so sudden that Bryce impulsively swiped at her face and knocked the V.R goggles. The white butterfly flitted to the window and rested on the balcony. She approached and frowned, but not at the butterfly. The art department had modelled and rendered a garden. The guests couldn’t access it as it was purely background detail. The sky however was an issue. Almost perfect aside from a vein – a line of white fuzzy dots that split the air – scarcely noticeable but seeing it broke the illusion.

‘Terry, fix the bloody sky. Families are paying a lot to see this. Iron out the seams. What’s with the rogue animation?’

‘Which one’s that?’

‘The white butterfly.’

‘Ah, apologies, Bryce. That’s one of mine. One sec.’

She heard a tap of a keyboard in her ear and the seams of the sky knitted together. The butterfly flitted out of existence.

‘Excellent. Disconnect.’

King Henry and his associates froze, the light in the hall began to darken. The image lost its texture. A shadow of the banquet remained for a second before fading away. Bryce lifted the goggles and blinked at the light. Terry, sat in the corner of the white panelled room, was surrounded by monitors. He tapped at a keyboard while the wardrobe-sized computer behind him whirred.

‘Once the fork fuck up’s sorted this one’s good to go.’

‘I’ll send an email,’ Terry said, his eyes glued to the monitor.

‘Good.’

Bryce checked her watch.

‘We’ve got time before the others get back from lunch. How’s our side project?’

‘All up and running,’ Terry said, his eyes glued to the monitor.

‘And?’

His eyes unglued from the monitor.

‘And what?’

Fuck’s sake.

‘Evie.’

‘Oh...yeah. Model’s fully rendered and rigged to the armature. Thanks to the vids you provided it should move like her. Can’t guarantee the hair textures will be to your liking, but the voice is accurate.’

‘And the personality?’

‘Everything she ever wrote on social media has been downloaded, and the diaries you provided have been translated into code.’ Terry lowered his spectacles. ‘I can’t guarantee she’ll be accurate.’

‘The personality’s tweakable...Terry.’ She paused.

‘What is it?’

‘Has anyone caught wind?’

‘I had different divisions work on the Evie model and her bedroom. For all they know, they’re working on two different projects. What should I say if the museum asks?’

‘They’ve got eight fully operational environments for visitors to explore.’

‘They paid for nine.’

‘Make something up. Tell them we had a problem rendering Joan of Arc, or that the Jade Emperor’s personality’s been glitching.’

‘I’ll send an email.’

Bryce pulled on the V.R goggles. Through them she could see the panels of the V.R room and Terry tapping away. With a final tap Terry and the panels in the room darkened, one by one. Eventually only one panel glowed in the dark.

‘Rendering the room now,’ Terry’s voice crackled in her ear.

The panel became a window, and rippling from the frame were colours of white and pink, painting the walls in texture, shaping the dark until Bryce was standing in a teenager’s bedroom.

‘I’m not impressed, Terry. The saturation on the wallpaper is too high. The textures seem...flatter.’

‘Thought it would be better to put funds towards the Evie Sim.’

‘Why can I hear a lawnmower?’

‘It was an addition made by the sound department.’

‘I don’t like it. It’s too...artificial.’

‘The art department went off the images you provided. Some liberties were taken.’

Bryce harrumphed as she inspected the room. A judo suit was neatly folded on top of a chest of drawers. A motivational cat poster with the words *Hang in There* was tacked up with photos of Evie’s friends, however the resolution was so blurry the images presented were either pixilated or blank. The bed cover was the worst offender. The texture of the cover was so flat it looked as if an iron had been run over it.

‘I wish her room had been this clean. She spent hours upstairs, saying she was “sorting it”, but it always looked a tip.’ She glanced out of the window. The art department hadn’t rendered a location model for the garden so what she saw looked like a painting of a backyard curving from one side of the window to the other.

‘I’m importing Evie now, Bryce.’

The rustle of bedsheets and the creak of bedsprings made Bryce turn. The teenager sat up in bed; a strand of hair fell over

her eye and she brushed it back, yawning. Then she saw Bryce. Their eyes met. Bryce froze. Evie's jaw tensed.

'Did I do something wrong?' Evie asked.

When Bryce said nothing, Evie brought her feet close to her body and leaned against the wall. Still, Bryce said nothing.

Her earpiece crackled. 'Everything okay, Bryce?'

Bryce's hand quivered as she reached out to touch Evie. To feel her cheek, but Evie cringed into the wall. Bryce felt a flare of anger, but she remembered the King Henry Sim, and how her fingers had slid through his arm.

She's not real, she told herself, yet knowing this made looking at her all the more difficult. The colour of Evie's eyes was exact. How they changed from green to brown and the way the light reflected off them was startlingly real.

'Why are you in my—'

Suddenly Evie's body petrified, the lawnmower died, the sickly-sweet smell of the V.R room invaded her nose. All Bryce could think about was how she had last seen those eyes in the morgue. Her pupils had dilated and spread over her iris. Her pupils had looked like black buttons.

'Bryce?'

'What, Terry?!'

'I said, *is everything okay?*'

'Yes!...no. The artist's just captured her likeness. It caught me off guard. Unpause the simulation...I said continue it, Terry.'

Terry said nothing for a while, then the lawnmower restarted, and Evie blinked.

'—room?'

Bryce cleared her throat but felt as if she'd swallowed a shot of sawdust.

'I wanted to ask you a question, Evelin.'

'Right?'

'Don't speak to me in that tone.'

‘Yes, mother,’ Evie said, slowly, without blinking.

‘Good. Now, I need to ask you a question and you’re going to answer it honestly.’

‘I didn’t sneak out again.’

‘I...I wasn’t going to ask that.’

‘Right, well, I did go to my judo lesson. I was a few minutes late to track run, but I’ve memorised my lines for the play. I’ve done everything *you* asked, are you going to tell me I can’t have a lie-in? For Christ’s sake, it’s Saturday.’

Bryce felt a cold crawling sensation on her skin. The personality was so...alive.

‘Why do you hate me?’ Bryce asked.

Evie wavered. ‘What?’

‘Why do you hate me? It’s a simple question.’

‘I don’t hate you.’

‘I think you’re lying, Evie.’

‘I don’t know what you—’

‘You are lying, Evie! I heard you say it!’

Evie burst out laughing.

‘Has work finally got to you or something? Why are you looking at me funny?’

Bryce’s earpiece crackled. ‘You need to calm down—’

‘SHUT UP, TERRY!’

‘Who the hell is Terry! Have you completely lost it?’

‘Me! Lost it! Oh, that’s rich. I’m not the one who climbed a fucking tree and split her skull!’

The simulation froze. The room darkened and the after image of Evie’s face, a ghost, lingered in her vision.

Bryce pulled the goggles off.

‘Terry, what the hell happened!’

Terry’s wrinkly face popped up from behind a monitor.

‘You swore in the simulation.’

‘Bloody safety boot. Can you turn it off?’

Terry pushed his spectacles up and looked at the monitor. He sniffed.

‘Why don’t you just...not swear in front of her?’

‘Can it be turned off?’

‘No.’

‘Are you lying?’

‘Bryce, the program is based on the museum models, the family-friendly safety procedures are built-in.’

‘Fuck.’

‘Keep that up, and you’ll be ejected again.’

Bryce breathed heavily through her nose.

‘Do you want me to boot it up?’

‘No, actually I want you to delete everything. Yes, Terry, I want you to boot it up!’

Terry tapped away, and Bryce pulled the goggles down. Evie’s ghost still lingered under her eyes. Her earpiece crackled.

‘I didn’t know she fell,’ he said softly.

‘Boot it up, Terry.’

‘Okay...okay. Try not to swear this time.’

Colour infused texture rolled over the dark like a carpet over a floor. The textures moulded into a bed and after a moment Bryce was watching Evie wake up again. She watched as Evie yawned and brushed her hair aside, and when Evie saw her she said:

‘Did I do something wrong?’

‘No...well, yes.’

Once again, Evie brought her feet close, arms wrapped around her knees, and leaned against the wall.

‘Pause it, Terry. I said pause it.’

‘What’s wrong?’

‘She’s too sad,’ Bryce said, waving a hand at Evie. ‘She was never this sad. I want you to remove it.’

‘Remove it?’

‘The personality is tweakable so tweak it. Remove her sadness and while we’re at it delete the rebellious streak. I can’t stand her when she shouts.’

‘Bryce, tampering with the character matrix isn’t a good idea.’

‘The personality is tweakable.’

‘Bryce, we like to think personality is a rainbow of colour but it’s simply six core emotions. Happiness, Sadness, Anger, Disgust, Shock and Fear, although anger and disgust, and fear and shock can be lumped together. Let’s call them Hatred and Phobia—’

‘Terry, I don’t care—’

‘—point is everyone has different levels at different times. They shape who we are...and you want me to remove half her emotions.’

‘Then remove her *Phobia* and let’s get on with it.’

‘Bryce that’s not...’ Terry stopped, sighed, and though he went quiet she could hear his voice fumble.

Evie blinked. Her body opened up and she sat back straight, hands on her legs and looked steadily at Bryce.

Finally, to business.

‘Evie, I want you to be honest with me.’

A small smile splayed on Evie’s face and Bryce felt a shiver. Evie suddenly seemed so petit and doll-like.

‘What is wrong?’ Evie said.

To...to business.

‘I want you to tell me why you said you *hated* me.’

‘I do not hate you. I love you.’ The smile tugged at the corners of Evie’s lips.

Oh, god...her eyes are black buttons.

‘Bryce,’ Terry’s voice crackled, ‘when did Evie reveal these feelings?’

‘That’s...it was in the hospital. Just before she...why does she look like that? Like one of the puppets.’

‘Um...Bryce–’

‘I know she *is* one, but before now she was so...there’s something wrong with her eyes.’

‘Bryce, if Evie told you what she told you in hospital, and she didn’t have access to a phone or diary we can’t reconstruct her from that day. Key information is missing.’

So all of this was for nothing.

‘Give her her personality back.’

‘You’re going to try again?’

‘Not exactly.’

The doll smile pressed into a firm line and the black buttons filled with colour and light.

‘Did I do something wrong?’

‘No, no. You didn’t do anything wrong. I...I feel like I’ve been hard on you.’

Evie lifted her head.

‘Everything alright?’

‘Not really no. Would you be quiet for a minute. I want to get this out.’

Evie raised a brow but leaned forward.

‘I have...tried to give you every opportunity to succeed and experience as much as possible, but I also feel that I’m...what’s the word I’m looking for.’

‘Suffocating?’ Evie suggested.

Pressuring you. I feel like I’ve pressured you a lot and I...I don’t want you to feel overwhelmed. I don’t want you to feel that I’m limiting your freedom because I don’t want you to go off and do something stupid because of me. I’m not the best person in the world and there are days where you’ll feel like I don’t love you, but I do. I’m really fucking shit at showing it but I care about you and...I’ll do better. I promise I’ll try.’

Evie stared at Bryce, then her gaze shifted towards the window.

‘That’s all I have to say, Terry.’

The room darkened. Bryce pulled off the goggles, composed herself, wiped away the mascara trickling down her cheek and said, ‘terminate the program, Terry.’

‘Are you sure, Bryce? You didn’t get your answer.’

‘I don’t think it matters.’

Terry tapped away. Bryce was hanging up the goggles when a bright ping came from the computer.

‘Is that the art department? Tell them if the forks are sorted this week they’ll get doughnuts. What’s wrong with you?’

Terry’s nose was inches from the monitor. ‘Bryce, come here.’

Bryce approached and looked the screen.

‘Who sent that?’

‘Who do you think?’

‘But...from inside?’

‘Seems so.’

‘But that’s...’ Bryce put a hand to her mouth. She leaned towards the screen and tentatively typed out a response to the question.

E: Hi Mum. Can we talk?

B: ...

Harrison Lake

Born in Stafford, Harrison spent his formative years living in a haunted house in the peak district and learnt to read in a treehouse built by his Dad. Harrison currently has many projects underway including a ten-book series, a trilogy and a duology. He procrastinates on if he’ll ever finish one. Harrison has a BA in English Language and Creative Writing and is studying for his MA. Harrison is a lover of the three C’s. Chocolate, cats and corgis.

Crow Overlooking

It was on a leaf-blown day that I met Gypsy. I was moving towards warm spot, a bright one which you can't stay in for long before starting to burn. I need heat, so I move in and out of these spots during light-time, as well as eating. The latter is what I do mostly. Green foods are my favourite, and I like to eat them in the warm. Gypsy seemed to have same idea.

He was aiming towards nearby spot, and this was how I first saw him. In a race. I guessed how big space was and quickened, as there wouldn't be room for both of us. Larger water droplets were difficult to move around and slowed me down, but I pushed on. It seemed that he was going to win.

'Wait!' I almost caught up.

He ignored me, or maybe he didn't hear?

Not important – he had now won. I slowed and approached with caution. He appeared to be broader and older. A prideful rival.

'No room 'ere, sorry.'

I was taken aback by the deep tone and tried to match my voice to his. 'I see. I'll go and find the next one.'

He made a sound which made ripples and leaf wobble. 'There's more than 'nuff room, I'll move up. 'Ere,' he said before gesturing to his west-facing side.

My instinct was that there was no threat, relax. 'Thank you. How good of you. I'm Burnet.'

'It's n'bother Burnet, the name's Gypsy. 'Least that's what all t'others been called me.'

'Gypsy,' I said. 'I don't like to miss spots.'

'Yuh should be goin' faster, speshly at yur age. Not eatin' enuff greens?'

'Not today. Crow was overlooking, I had to wait. Was getting cold though. Can't be cold and hungry at night, can we.'

‘Nay, that don’t end well. Din’t for my ol’ friend. Best to eat quick now, while our Crow’s away.’

I agreed. We ate in peaceful quiet, and my body soaked up warmth from light and company.

‘How long you been here for?’ I asked.

‘Ay, awhile now. Most times there’s n’bother countin’ Hole moons, cuz I’ve seen so many.’

‘Hole moons?’

‘They’re old, a beauty thing. Crow told me t’name, n’ by Her grace, Hole moon lets her find grubs when none-other light’s a-shinin’. An’ if you climb up top, you can see Moon, surrounded by Her little’uns like wee bright-spots. All t’others ‘mongst us, owl, fox, deer, an’ hedgehog come out too, praisin’ an’ huntin’. Grass-land hides ‘em, but our Hole moon reveals all of ‘em. I ‘aven’t been up high an’ seen ‘em for a long time.’

‘But Crow is bird? Bird is bad, Gypsy.’

‘Nay. She’s as bad as you or I. Why, we’re as bad as greens, or moon, or worm hidin’ under-land. How’d y’think our Crow were any different?’

Bird is bad. Dark and black and eyes that flit, back and forth. It sleeps during day and appears at night. I can tell when it’s close by the hairs on my back standing up.

‘She eats worm. Eats us,’ I said, as had moving thought about when Crow whooshed past me once, while clutching worm. I had fell off my leaf and landed on another lower down. I thought I might fall to ground and end up like poor worm. Best to stay hid.

‘Ay, she eats worms. But you needn’t worry ‘bout ol’ Crow – there are those what’re much bigger than her, an’ what she said she keep-aways.’

‘I’ve never seen “much bigger” than Crow.’

‘I ‘ave,’ he said, ‘an’ by mercy tell, I trust her.’

He lifted his yellowed head towards sky. ‘She all-ways protects us, don’t y’see? We’re on near-high, an’ we’re safe from the be-low an’ under, but she’s guardin’ us from those we don’t much see now.’

I listened and thought it wise to keep quiet.

The spot we were sharing was fade and I had eaten full. I said goodbye and went back under thicket. Gypsy slipped away to other branch and said he would see me again if I grew little longer and weightier.

Moon went by, Bird came back. In its mouth was holding green fly, with laced wings broken. The stem-legs twitched and then were gone as Crow swallowed. I didn’t go to warm spots that day. Went to bed cold and hungry. Then again next, crawling into dark spots where I stay hid from Crow.

If it could spot me, I stay under leaf. So, I practiced still like Stick Insect. Appear as leaf, or greens, any thing but Crow food. Moons passed. Eat greens, hide, still. Still made me cold and worse when water droplets fell on leaf above, sliding down to mine and crashing. I had to risk drying off after in warm spots, otherwise I became cold and struggle to breathe. Dark time felt longer. I barely slept.

Next light day, no Crow. Back in the bright! I could stretch out my body and wriggle, and the leaf I was on swayed in wind. My back hairs, no longer tufts, swayed too.

I spotted Gypsy on branch near mine at east-side and called for him.

‘Gypsy, Gypsy, come down to leaf – it is so warm and bright.’

He moved over leaves, crossed to my branch. He seemed slower.

‘Burnet, yes,’ said Gypsy, heaving his weight. What before seemed pride, pulling him up, was now burden, pulling him down. ‘Howzit been, young’un?’

I thought about answering in truth, but Gypsy seemed different. ‘Good.’

‘Mm. Lost a bitta weight ‘ave us?’

He saw through my untruth. ‘I know you said Crow good. I can’t see Crow as good. It ate greenfly, all bent, but alive. Then not—’

‘—It’s mighty cruel. Y’ must think how cruel is all bad, when she’s off killin’ and makin’ meals of ones like us.’

‘Yes, yes, I hid. Not eat or many sleeps. I tried thinking Crow good, I did. But thought: what if I was greenfly?’

Gypsy moved in front of me, eyes to eyes. His front hairs brushed my head as he talked. ‘I ‘ave thought, Bernet: wharif I were greenfly. I’m an oldie; soon I’ll no longer be ‘ere as I am. An’ when it comes our time to gone-life, as all thins an’ ones do, will I gone-life like greenfly. Broken. Eaten.’

‘No, not you, Gypsy!’

‘It could ‘appen. The cold’ll come soon, an’ you’ll go all eye-shut as y’kind does, an’ I’ll go. This is how we are, Burnet. No untruth. Yuh shud think.’

‘But we are same, I thought. Don’t you think we are same, us?’

‘O’course we’re same, in sorts-a ways. I jus’ think showin’ y’how different both of us is tells truth. An’ as for Crow, owl, fox, deer, hedgehog, y’can come see ‘em wit’ me. Up top.’

‘You would do for me?’ Though they sounded cruel too.

‘I will, ay. While I still—’

‘—Up top, then to Hole moon!’ If Gypsy was truth, then so was Crow. There must be reason to him not being scared.

After sleep with Gypsy on one leaf by mine, we began climb. Crow was nearby, but Gypsy said it wasn’t any threat.

The trunk was steep. We had to move north-east up the tree, then north-west, and hide under leaves when rain fell. His

company made it less alone. He told me about owl, a bird larger than Crow who glides in sky without sound. She has a moon-head which turns all the way around.

It was his stories which made hard climb a little easier. Each one was like fresh water droplet I could drink in. We had to quick though, as he said soon would come Hole moon. We moved while light and rustled the leaves as we raced. Gypsy couldn't race for long up-tree. He panted, which was worse slept side-to-side in dark.

Light again, and quieter. No panting.

'Gypsy, are you hid?' I looked around leaf edge. I practiced still until dark time, but he didn't return.

Dark passed, and seeing no thing of Gypsy, I went back up tree. Maybe he at top? Or had Crow got him? I had forgotten about Crow while with Gypsy.

I climbed fast. Faster than Crow, and I whooshed by branches over bark.

Then, there were no more branches higher. I was at up top! It was like how Gypsy told. Sky was all around, and same colour as his red back spots. Sun sat on grassland west ways.

Then dark and sun-gone, so time for Hole moon. A beauty thing. It looked like when I bit hole in leaf and bright could fit through. Maybe a thing bigger than tree bit Sky, and left Hole. Gypsy would know.

In grasslands, I looked like Gypsy told to. Hedgehog had back hairs like me, but thicker. Fox ignored hedgehog and deer gazed with bright-eyes. Deer not saw, but Moon-head owl glided over silent still.

I saw Crow in sky. There was no leaf nearby to hid.

It flew closer. It was clutching some thing which looked like rounded bark. Gypsy?

Crow had two Holes where before dark eyes were. I was going to be like worm. I closed eyes.

I could fell off leaf and gone-life, but Crow landed on next branch.

Crow was not eating. It looked at fox, deer, hedgehog and owl. Let the thing it was clutching rest on branch side-to-side. A cocoon maybe, and Crow, she looked less alone.

I always thought what if I was greenfly. Or greens. Or mantis. I never thought: what if I was Crow?

M.M. Mancey

M.M. Mancey is a First Class Honours graduate in English Language and Creative Writing from the University of Gloucestershire, UK. She is the Communications Officer for the International Ecolinguistics Association, and is undertaking a PhD in this field.

Circular Breathing

We'd booked to climb the bridge on Wednesday. I chose a 9am slot; 'the day-break slot,' the Bridge Climb website told me. I didn't care about what time the sun rose or set; I just wanted a slot for less than \$174. It had been Sienna's idea to go, anyway.

'For the views. You'll love it. All the tourists do.'

On the day of the climb, I waited for nearly an hour for her outside the box office. An Aboriginal local came and laid out a colourful rug, sat cross legged, and heaved a didgeridoo into his lap. I checked my phone every five minutes, watched the streets brighten. But she didn't show.

Sydney Harbour Bridge wasn't the perilous scramble I'd originally pictured. The website hadn't reassured me that climbing one hundred and thirty-four metres of steel (weighing just over fifty-two thousand tonnes) was safe and fun.

Instead, once I'd changed and deposited my belongings in the lockers provided, the guide led the group through the back of the box office to an elevator, which when we stepped out, led to one of the corners of the steel arches of the bridge. Looking up, I saw the grids of black steel cutting through the sky, zig zagging above me like a wire fence. I wondered whether it was too late for a refund.

About a quarter of the way up the bridge, I realised I'd forgotten to put on my sun cream. It was already twenty degrees, according to our Bridge Climb guide. The eight of us were wearing harnesses that wrapped around our blue and grey climbing suits. Mine was damp at the neckline. I pulled my cap lower over my forehead and pushed my sunglasses on, wondering if it was obvious I'd been crying.

Despite the stairs being built into the steelwork, I was taking tiny steps and clasping onto the railing either side of me. At this height, the wind was rushing past my ears, like jets of water. I breathed heavily, squinting up towards our tour guide. I couldn't hear what he was saying, so I stared at the back of the lady in front of me, watching her curly black hair blast sideways under her hat.

When I looked down, I saw a dark green and white ferry pass under me. It was speckled with the different coloured hats and unprotected tops of heads, like a pixelated photo. It disappeared under the step I was on, churning up the water behind it. Too rough for surfing.

Sienna had taught me how to spot a great wave when we'd gone surfing on Coogee (not Bondi; too many people smoking too much weed) the previous weekend.

'Watch them as they come up,' she said. 'They go frothy on top, like spit.'

She was eating a whippy ice cream, and chose this moment to tilt it towards me.

'Hey, Liv? Smell this.'

I leaned in. Sienna shoved the ice cream into my face, smearing it up my nose and over my mouth. I shook my head as she laughed at me. Droplets of melting ice cream flicked onto the sand. I ran over to the nearest cafe and snatched up a pile of napkins, dabbing my face clean.

We waited until the evening and watched the fruit bats soar above the trees, as big as house cats. Moths danced in the lights from the café, and as the drinks flowed so did we. I had no rhythm at all, but she could belly dance, her navel piercing catching the light as she moved. Sickly cocktails meant sticky kisses followed soon after, before we stumbled off towards the town, clumsily thumbing through our phones for an Uber.

We were told off by our driver for kissing in the back of his cab.

Back at her flat, Sienna tripped over the door mat and tumbled to the kitchen floor. I followed her, both of us laughing up at the ceiling. We kissed again, fingers wound in each other's hair.

I asked her what we were going to do in the morning.

'Coathanger? Bridge Climb?'

'I'll hate it.'

Sienna rested her head on my chest. 'I'll be with you. No need to worry.'

'Maybe later in the week.'

We slept like mirrors of one another on the carpet. Our foreheads and the tips of our noses touched; our salty hair streamed out behind us, rippling across the floor.

We'd reached the summit by about 10.30am. Looking to my right, I could see the sails of the Opera House, bright white below us, stark against the terracotta path and steps that surrounded it. I knew from a visit down this walkway with Sienna that if you strolled down to the end, there were stone steps down to the sea. A wild seal lived there. You weren't supposed to feed it in case it tamed the animal.

Sienna had ignored the signs and thrown a Tim-Tam down the steps. I'd watched it arc through the sky before it disappeared behind the wall.

'Can seals eat chocolate?'

'She can now!' Sienna replied, grinning at me.

When I went back a few days later, the seal wasn't there. There was a dark stain on the steps where she usually lay.

Back on the bridge, our guide was waving at us and shouting something into the wind, holding up a selfie stick.

'Perfect spot,' the lady in front of me said.

The man ahead of us, who I assumed was her partner, took her hand. I looked away, focusing on a water taxi zooming across the water below in a perfect 'C' shape.

The lady turned to me, one hand on the rim of her cap. 'Would you mind taking a picture of us, doll?'

I looked up. 'Won't the guide do it?'

'At the summit, yeah. Can't miss that view, though.' Reaching down her top, she produced her phone from her bra. I could see a sheen of sweat on the screen.

'Oh, I don't...It's a bit high up. I don't trust myself,' I said, drawing my hand back.

'Oh. Right.' The lady looked down at her feet. I followed her line of eyesight. A pelican soared underneath us, like a big white kite.

'It's fine.' She put her phone back in her bra and turned back to her partner. 'We'll just ask the tour guide to take it.'

'Can't we ask him to send us one?' the partner asked.

'We can,' the woman said, glancing back at me before pulling her cap down her forehead. 'But I wanted one for us.'

There were a lot of things I'd wanted for me and Sienna. I'd wanted us to do this climb together, and have our picture taken for my phone background. I'd wanted her to come and meet my parents when they came to visit from the UK. I'd wanted her to not let go of my hand in the middle of the Queen Victoria Centre when two men wolf whistled at us.

'Well, we can't all get what we want,' I said.

'Sorry?'

'We can't all get what we want.'

The woman was glaring at me now. I stared steadily back at her, before she turned away from me. A flock of cockatoos flew under the bridge, cawing as they shrank into the ocean skyline.

Coming down the bridge was the hardest part. After taking pictures of each of us in turn, the guide showed us a set of steps that led down to the lower level of the bridge. If you took the coat hanger description literally, we slid down through the top of the metal and met the second rung underneath us. My knees ached and my ankles were twinging with each step. It felt like pins and needles in my legs. I could feel cramps creeping up my thighs.

Sienna had laughed at me because I got cramps the first time we slept together. It had been in the early days of my Australian life, about a month after I'd come over from the UK. I had to lie with my legs up against the wall, turning myself into a right angle.

'Look at you, you nutcase,' she said, touching her finger to the corner of her mouth.

'It's not funny. It bloody hurts!'

'If you were a guy I'd have left by now.' Sienna sat up, grabbing her t-shirt and pulling it over her head. 'Anyone would think you didn't like what I was doing.'

'If I were a guy you wouldn't have come twice already,' I said, turning my head to look at her. Sienna laughed and ran a hand through her hair, gathering a fistful of ginger waves in her palm.

'*Touché*, grumpy.'

'Well, then.'

'*Well*, then.'

She paused. I could see the freckles across her cheeks. They contorted slightly when she opened her mouth wide enough.

The ache in my legs had subsided enough by that point that I could swing them down and turn to face her.

I kissed her. She smelled of coconut oil.

'Want to try again?' I said the words softly, brushing my lips against the thin skin just below her ear lobe.

‘My brother will be over soon.’ She spoke in a low voice as I kissed the hollow of her collarbone.

‘Does he know I’m here?’

‘He knows. But he doesn’t know.’

I paused. ‘Right.’

‘It’s gonna stay that way for now.’ Sienna looked at me. Her hand found the back of my head.

I didn’t respond.

‘Look, Liv, it’s early days. Just forget about it for now.’ Sienna’s hand skated down my back and wound around my hip, brushed my inner thigh.

‘OK?’ Her hand moved up, down, up, down. I turned my head away as she kissed my neck. Her hair tickled my shoulders. I closed my eyes.

‘OK.’ I gave in, let her kiss me, both of us sinking down into the bed sheets. Her hands wound up my arms, her fingers interlocking with mine. Our lips parted at the same time, and as I breathed in, she breathed out, cyclical, in time with one another.

‘OK, guys, last few steps, now!’

Our bridge guide was waving us down towards the steel welded into the stone pillar. As I walked, great long shadows passed across me from the black metal laddering above me, like ripped tights against the skin of the sky. My nose was taught and sore from sunburn, and the back of my neck was stinging, too. It felt like I’d been slapped, hard. I thought of my aloe vera gel back at the flat and longed for a smearing of it across my back and shoulders to cool my skin.

Before I dropped down to the lower rungs of steps, I couldn’t move my legs, and I started hyperventilating.

‘I can’t get down.’

The tour guide turned around, extending his arm. ‘It’s OK, just grab my hand.’

‘I want Sienna.’

‘Who’s Sienna?’

I thought of us kissing, our synchronized breathing. I tilted my head to the sky as I cried. I saw the gleam of a plane passing overhead, disappearing with a flash as it caught the sunlight. I watched three square holes appear as the wheels descended.

At that moment, I remembered coming in to land at Sydney airport ten months before. It was 6am local time, and I was watching the television screen on the back of the seat in front of me. The clouds dissipated over the camera on top of the plane. We dipped towards the runway, the turbulence making the plane quiver. I gripped my arm rests so hard that the leather covering had flattened against the plastic. As the sky cleared and the runway came into view, I foresaw the plane slipping sideways, bouncing on the tarmac, and skidding off to the right, its nose sparking up.

Now, on the bridge, looking out and gripping onto the hot hand rail, I saw white blocks of flats, paths speckled with bushes and the fleshy, cackling face of the Lunar Park entrance on my left; the glistening water churned like spit by ferries and the dark grey buildings of Circular Quay was on my right. Even this high up, the sea air tasted salty. Seeing the city in miniature took me straight back to being on the plane, breathing through the turbulence, like a diver catching their breath.

‘It’s OK,’ I said. ‘I’m OK. I can do it.’

As I left the box office, the heat of the day wrapping around me, I saw the Aboriginal man from the morning, still sitting outside, playing a continuous wavering burst of didgeridoo. I stopped and watched him. He didn’t seem to be pausing for breath as he blew into the wooden tube. His cheeks puffed outwards as he

closed the gap between the top of the instrument and his skin, like he'd aimed for a kiss on the cheek but missed, and caught it on the corner of the mouth. I took a step closer, the cool shade dissipating into the glow of the sun on the ground. I stood listening for the longest time, the occasional passer-by stopping to watch before carrying on towards Circular Quay.

The note held. Still, I waited.

Out on the sea, I could hear a seal barking.

Becca Edwards

Becca is a Postgraduate student at the University of Gloucestershire, currently studying Creative and Critical Writing. She has previously been published in *Smoke* and *Fire* (two of the university anthologies), and her areas of interest are feminism, the LGBTQI+ community, mental health linked with creativity, and writing critically about popular culture.

I'll Never Leave You

I remember when Mummy showed me how to plait my hair. She said it was easy. Just bits that go over each other and make it pretty. I didn't get it at first. She said I'd understand soon, but I wanted to know right away. When I went to Mia's party, I knew all the other girls were going to have plaits. I didn't want a stupid ponytail. In the end, Mummy did it for me and when I saw Mia, I told her that I did it. Mummy just smiled and waved at me.

She's the best Mummy ever and I love her to the moon, around it and back again.

She watches me when I brush my teeth, grinning and laughing with her grey hair falling down over her face. She's always made sure I brush my teeth right. Sometimes she plays Hide and Seek with me, and when I count, I peek through my fingers and I see her go through walls or doors, and then I can't find her. She pulls faces at me in the mirror and when her mouth's open, I see gaps where her teeth were...all the ones left are yellow. She isn't behind me when I turn around.

She squeezes my hand tight every time I'm walking home from school, but I can't always feel it. It makes me giggle. She plays with me in my room and steals all the tea and cake from Mr Sheep and Mrs Goaty. I'm naughty because I'm always giving Mummy the biggest cup so she can have more tea. My doggy cup floats in the air and when she's thirsty, she grabs it and drinks it. She doesn't stay the whole time because when Daddy comes in to check on me, she hides. Then she comes back again. At night time, I like how she tickles my back when I'm going to sleep. She sings *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star* in a whisper until I'm dreaming. She hangs from the light and dangles a hand down at me, watching me and keeping me safe. Her hands are always dirty, but I try to stretch to reach her. When I do, her hand is freezing. I can't hold on for long. When she hangs down near

my face, I can smell her breath. It's like gone off cabbage and it makes me cough. Her nails are dirty and really long, and they scratch me when I'm not looking properly. It leaves a little mark. I have to be careful and hide Mummy's marks. It's our secret.

Dad doesn't see her, but I do.

I was playing in the park after school and I found it hard to get to the top of the climbing frame. Dad was buying a drink, so I played with my friends, Susan and Lilly. They got to the top really quickly, but I was too slow and was only at the middle. I started to get down when I felt Mummy holding onto my ankle and pushing me up so that I could reach. She held on quite tight and it hurt a little, but I didn't mind. I knew she was trying to help. When I was at the top, I looked for her and even closed my eyes, but I couldn't see her. Maybe it was because I wasn't wearing my glasses.

For dinner, me and Dad had spaghetti and meatballs. My favourite. I was sucking in the last bit of pasta.

'Mum do you want some spaghetti?' I whispered.

Dad looked up and stared at me for a minute. He watched me and sat still.

'What did you say?'

'Mum...she looks hungry and tired.'

He looked around the room and straight past Mummy. She stood next to me, staring at Dad. I think she was getting upset because when she tried to touch his hair, nothing happened. Mummy always smells like rotten eggs or farts and sometimes I hold my nose. And she never blinks. Like never. It scared me at first, but I got used to it. He looked back at me and took me into the kitchen.

Dad sat down and looked at the photos on the board. He saw the one of me and him. We were at the zoo and we were making

funny faces by the monkey cages. I'm pulling my best monkey face and he was just laughing.

'Dad?'

He turned around and patted his lap. I felt like a doggy. It was getting dark in the kitchen. Mummy liked it that way. She whispered to me to keep the light off and bits of her smelly hair went in my face, but I could see Daddy pointing to the light.

'Put it on, darling.'

I nodded, switched it on and walked over to him. Mummy grabbed my arm and growled at me to stay, but I shook my head and went to sit on Daddy's lap. Mummy can't be greedy because I need to see Daddy too. He kissed my forehead and cuddled me and Goaty tighter. She stood behind him and leaned over Daddy's head. Floating in the air, she looked down at me. Her arms were going everywhere, and she was spinning around really fast. It made me dizzy. She whistled really loud in Daddy's ear, but he couldn't hear it. It was so loud that it hurt my ears. Her eyes were just wide. Not blinking. It made me think of Auntie Lilly's cat. Her eyes were like that. Green and scary.

Dad tickled my arm and stared at me. He shivered and I knew it was because of Mummy blowing on his neck. I could see the hair on his arms stand up too.

'What did you mean, before?'

'Do you not see her?'

'What? No.'

I shrugged my shoulders and put my head on his chest, and he cuddled me. Maybe I'm just special because only I can see her. I was confused if Daddy was crying or not. His body was shaking.

'Daddy are you okay?'

We stayed quiet and sad in his arms. The clock ticked. It was louder than I remembered. I sat up and stared at him.

'She's here right now Dad.'

'What?' Daddy was getting angry.

‘She’s always at home for dinner.’

‘What?’

‘She sings me to sleep and holds my hand and—’

‘Baby, she’s gone!’

Silence. I was scared. I didn’t want him to hurt Mummy. Not when she’s in the same room hearing this.

I pointed at her, who I could just about see by the doorway. She waved at me and tilted her head. She started crawling towards me slowly, drooling and spitting on the floor.

‘Sweetie—’

‘How could you ignore her?’

Dad tried to hug me again, but I pushed him away and stood up.

‘No. No! NO! You will not hurt Mummy!’

I ran out of the kitchen and up the stairs to my room. I shut my door and sat on the floor next to my bed. I could feel Mummy following me.

‘You’re here with me, Mum...right?’

My princess light switched on and off for a little bit. In the end it stayed off. I knew that was from Mummy. She always left the light off in the end.

The next day, when I woke up, I tried to find her. I pulled the duvet off, ran to my wardrobe and opened it. I peeked behind my dollhouse that was by my shoes and then at the top by the hangers, right on my tippy toes but I couldn’t see her. Where is she? She didn’t say goodnight last night.

When I went to brush my teeth, I even looked behind the shower curtain and the cupboard, in case she was hiding. We always used to play Hide and Seek there.

I could hear Dad coming up the stairs.

‘Abi, are you okay?’

I folded my arms and frowned at him.

‘Fine.’

He knelt down and cuddled me, holding my arms tight, and putting his head in my shoulder. It tickled a bit, but I didn’t want to laugh. I was still angry with him.

‘You upset Mummy.’

He moved back and looked at me, holding me.

‘What do you mean?’

‘She didn’t read to me last night and I haven’t had my morning kiss.’

Daddy cried. He turned away and made a weird noise. I stayed where I was, but I didn’t know if I wanted to hug him or not.

I looked at the photo on the wall of me, Dad and Mum. It was my last birthday party. I had a big Gorilla cake which had jam in it and Mummy did my hair in a big nice plait, like Elsa the princess. Mummy bought me a tiara and I wore a big pink dress. All my friends came from school.

‘Happy birthday to you!’

I remember blowing out my candles straight away and hugging Mum and Dad. I had the best day ever. Some of Mum’s friends were crying in the kitchen and hugging Mummy but I thought they were just happy. Mummy didn’t look very well at my party, but Daddy told me she had a cold. I got up from listening and found Ella who played princesses with me.

Daddy walked me to school, but we were walking really fast. I couldn’t keep up, so I stopped in the path outside our house.

‘Let’s wait for Mummy!’

‘Come on darling, we’re going to be late.’

He grabbed my hand and we walked off again. I thought of it like a game where you can’t put your foot in any of the lines of the brick things on the floor. If you do, you lose. I had fun

playing it and I think I won because I didn't touch any lines...just one. But that was a practice run.

Before we knew it, we were at school. It was windy and loads of my hair was in my face. Some of it in my mouth, which I couldn't spit out. Dad took me to the main bit of the school. He hadn't done that before.

'Dad where we going?'

He held my hand and didn't answer me. I didn't get it.

'Hi there, my name's Mark. I'm here to see Mrs Gatton.'

Me and Daddy sat down by an office and he turned around to me.

'Who?'

'I really want you to talk about Mummy.'

I didn't want to talk about Mummy. She's my secret and I don't want her to hide away from me.

'Just chat to the lady...please?'

'Can we have pizza for tea?'

Pepperoni was my favourite. I didn't really like the crust, but I loved the rest.

'Abi?'

The lady was young, and pretty. She had nice hair and a really cool dress on. I liked it.

'You go in, I'll stay here.'

I walked over to her and we went in her room. It was bright and there were pictures of cows, pigs and sheep on the walls. I saw my favourite book on the desk, *The Hungry Caterpillar*. And there was a beanbag. A red one. I always love sitting on them and wriggling my bum. She smiled at me.

'Sit down, Abi.'

I went straight for that beanbag. I jumped onto it and it felt so comfy.

She sat in a grown-up chair and wrote something on some paper.

'Do you know why you're here?'

I shook my head but then remembered.

‘To chat I think?’

I grinned at her because I loved chatting. I could do it all day.

‘I want us to talk about your Mummy.’

I stopped and stared at her. She smiled at me, but then I got confused.

‘Well I saw her yesterday, before Dad upset her.’

‘What did he do?’

‘He told me she was gone, but she isn’t!’

My heart was beating fast again, and I felt really angry. I wanted to cry.

‘We walk to school together and she tucks me in at night...’

I looked out the window and I saw a bird hanging off the windowsill. I think it was a pigeon. Maybe he was just resting before he flew off again. It must be hard flying all the time. Going around to find his friends and some breadcrumbs.

‘Do you know where your Mum is?’

‘Umm, maybe at home feeling sad, waiting for me...’

‘Why is she sad?’

‘Because Daddy doesn’t see her like I do.’

The lady went quiet. She stared at me.

‘Do you mind if I get your Dad?’

I shook my head. When she left, I went to look for that pigeon, but he was gone. He must have gone to meet his other pigeon friends. I looked at the empty windowsill.

‘I’ll never leave you Mum.’

I felt Mummy’s hand on my shoulder and her breathing in my ear. It was slow and it sounded like she was croaking like a frog. We both peered out the window.

‘Don’t worry Mummy, it’ll be our little secret.’

Asha Sutton

Asha is a First Class Honours Creative Writing graduate, and loves to write stories that address taboo topics in society. This piece is experimental, and something Asha has taken a step out of her comfort zone for. She has had various pieces published, both short stories and drama plays. She feels passionate about her writing and making a difference to her readers.

Saving Skyler

The year 2029

I cast the fishing line into the crashing waves and watched it splash down beside a garage. I stood in foot deep water on Beach Boulevard surrounded by empty houses. I haven't caught a fish in a month, but it's hard to quit old habits.

A dark form moved past me and a fin broke the surface. It headed past the closed bait shop and turned right past a boarded-up Wawa. I fumbled for my phone then dropped it into the water.

'Drat.' I pulled it out, but the screen remained dark and the shark disappeared down another street. The picture wouldn't have been that great anyway. This was the new normal all over the east coast of New Jersey and other states along the Atlantic Ocean. Pictures of all kinds of fish inland were on the internet. The most recent one showed a dolphin in an abandoned mall parking lot.

I reeled in my line and spotted a light in the distance. No boats fished here anymore since the rising tides. They, including me, over-fished everything, and the warmer water sent the remaining fish north. What was that boat doing out there?

'Hey, Molly.'

I knew it was Peter. I avoided him. I avoided everyone since I lost the boat. I couldn't face them knowing how I failed. It was my dream to own a boat and global warming ruined it. No matter whose fault, I was a failure.

'Go away, Peter.' I didn't want to deal with him. He always asked me out and I always said no. He never got the hint.

'Did you see the boat?' He pulled out his binoculars and stared at it.

‘I’m not blind.’ Except for the future when I invested in a fishing boat right before climate change escalated.

‘I wonder what they’re coming here for.’

‘Not to buy a house.’ Peter was a real estate agent. He once sold a million-dollar house. Now, he can’t sell a shack and he ended up living in the same apartment building as me. It used to be ten blocks from the beach. Now, it was beachfront property.

‘I know, but why?’

‘Not good. Listen, we watch them from a distance. Don’t let them see us.’ Nobody came here anymore. Everyone evacuated inland, but the two of us. If a boat was coming here it was up to no good and they didn’t expect us to be here.

‘I bet they’re traffickers bringing in drugs. They figure no one will stop them with all the flooding. They even pretend they’re a search and rescue team.’

‘And there’s a bigger market now.’

‘Yep. The people who moved inland will take anything these days to take the edge off their pain and misery.’

‘Yea, well what can we take?’

‘We can make love all night.’

‘Not a chance.’ I carried the fishing rod in front of me like a sword and strapped my surf bag over my shoulder as we sloshed through the dark water to the only pier left standing. It was near the lighthouse. The spinning light still was a beacon, but not of hope, more like of all that was lost. The water got higher every year and eventually, it will snuff the light out like a candle.

The engine of the boat got closer to the half-submerged docks.

‘How did it come to this?’ Peter said looking at the empty marina.

‘People like you selling and buying million-dollar homes on the beach, consuming everything like there was no tomorrow. People like me, catching fish every day and taking customers farther out to sea for trophy catches, and the corporations and

politicians only worried about dollars and not tomorrow. Well, tomorrow is here and we're doomed. The tide keeps getting higher and higher.'

Peter looked down. 'I'm sorry.'

'Me too, but we were only ants in the big picture. I kept quiet and that is a big part of the problem. I saw what was happening from my boat and ignored it just trying to make more money by going farther and fishing more.'

'We all screwed up.'

The boat got closer. 'Let me see your binoculars.' I leaned the fishing rod against a table and put my surf bag on top of it.

I zoomed in and saw two men on board. One steered while the other looked around. He pointed in our direction. I saw something metal on his hip.

'Damn, they're armed.'

'Call the police.'

'You know they're an hour away and that's even if they wanted to come here. No, we're on our own.'

'Let's hide.'

'Now you're using your brain.'

We sloshed to the apartment building which overlooked the docks. We went into my apartment and looked out the balcony window. The boat pulled up to the dock and the men got off. I opened the door to the balcony and heard a strange sound. Crying. It was coming from the boat.

'You were right. They are traffickers, but not drugs. People.'

'Oh no.'

I looked out and saw that they found my fishing equipment.

'We're in trouble.'

'Why?'

'I forgot my surf bag. It has my ID in it. My address is on it. Get out.'

We stumbled down the steps toward the back entrance. When we got out, I found a piece of driftwood and leaned it against the

door. We shoved trash cans and other debris to reinforce the barricade.

We heard the front door open and slam shut. I hoped both men went inside the building.

‘Peter, hurry. To the front.’

We sloshed through pockets of deeper water then searched for anything to block the front door. There was always debris around from the raising tides and we found metal poles and old barrels. We shoved everything against it.

‘Let’s get out of here.’ I gave him the keys to my truck.

‘You start the truck. I’ll be right there.’

‘Hurry up.’

I ran to the boat. There was no crying. Maybe I was too late. I banged on the locked cabin door.

‘Help,’ a girl yelled out.

‘I’ll try.’ There were no keys anywhere. I found a hammer with dark stains on it. I didn’t want to think about what they were from. I hit the doorknob and lock over-and-over. Cracks formed as Peter moved the truck closer.

He rolled down the window and yelled out. ‘Hurry up, they’re almost out.’

After a few more hits, the door flew open and the girl fell into my embrace. I dropped the hammer. Inside, another girl and boy laid motionless.

I pointed at them. The surviving girl shook her head.

I stared, afraid to touch them after the recent pandemic. There were rumours of another one starting and ships quarantined in Europe.

‘Dead.’ The girl wiped her eyes. ‘They drugged us.’

‘I’m sorry.’

‘Me too.’ A tear ran down her cheek.

‘What’s your name?’

‘Skyler.’

‘Okay, I’m Molly and that’s Peter. We have to hurry or we’ll all be dead.’

‘Wait.’ Skyler reached down into a blanket and picked up a small kitten. ‘The others died. It survived like me.’

‘Okay, but hurry.’

We made it into the truck and dove into the back seat as something ripped through the back of the truck followed by a loud sound. I looked at the apartment and saw the men on the balcony. They were holding guns.

‘Get down. Floor it, Peter.’

The truck splashed through the water like a speedboat. A few bullets ripped through the truck sending shards of glass all over us. After a few minutes, the shooting stopped, and a truck passed us going in the other direction. It was the trafficker’s connection.

We crossed the bridge to the mainland. I looked back and saw a flooded, ravaged land filled with darkness. I swore I saw a shark fin go past us before we hit the dry roads.

‘Skyler, where are you from.’

‘New York State.’ The kitten meowed.

‘Where were they taking you and the others?’

‘I don’t know. I heard one of the traffickers mention Washington DC and some rich politician. They said he was sick. I don’t think they meant physically sick. He was paying a lot for girls.’

‘Damn. I hate politicians.’ I said. ‘How did the traffickers find you?’

‘We lived in a farm town, but with the drought, there’s no jobs, no money. My parents died and I lived in foster care, but they were mean to me and left when things got bad. They just left me. I was homeless. There were food shortages, lines for food that ran out before I got any. I was desperate and saw an online ad for a job in Manhattan that paid a lot.’

‘No,’ Peter said.

‘I know, but I was desperate.’

‘I met the other two at the bus station. We were starving. They offered us jobs in a hotel cleaning the rooms, but it was a trick. They sold us to traffickers and took us to the docks.’ She sobbed. ‘They said there was less chance of them being caught on a boat, but on the radio, someone sounded an alarm about a Coast Guard ship in the area and since the coasts were now abandoned they headed to the shore to meet someone, but they picked the one place where you guys were at, which was bad for them and life-saving for me.’ She looked at me. ‘Thank you for saving my life.’

‘Thank God we’re stubborn and stayed there so long. Peter helped a little too.’

‘Thank you.’ She reached forward and touched Peter’s shoulder.

He nodded, unable to speak without revealing emotion.

I sent an anonymous text message to the state police with the location of the boat and about the men with the guns. They would not rush even if they did believe me, and it’s doubtful they would go there at all. Either way, the men would be gone by then and nobody would believe us.

‘Where do we go now?’ Peter asked. His hands held the wheel so tight his knuckles were white.

‘Away from the coast.’ I loved the Jersey Shore, but there’s nothing but danger there now. The memories of fishing in the sun, walking on the boardwalk, the arcades, laying on the beach reading books and eating ice cream all faded away. Any kids I might have in the future will never know what it was like. I closed my eyes. I needed to focus on the present.

‘I know a place in Pennsylvania. The Pocono Mountains. It used to be a ski resort, but since there’s no snow there anymore nobody goes there; my family owns a cabin there and they always leave a key behind the porch light in case we ever needed it. I’m the only one who will need it.’

‘I’ll miss the ocean,’ Peter said. ‘Even though we saw enough of it to last a lifetime.’

‘I think we’ll see it again.’

‘Let’s hope not too soon.’

‘Yea, you’re right.’

We drove in silence for a while trying not to imagine the ocean reaching the mountains.

‘Where’s your family?’ Skyler asked. Her voice was broken with sadness. She clutched the kitten.

‘Gone. My father went on a fishing boat to the north and never returned and my mother worked on a cruise ship that was quarantined in Finland because they feared a virus was on it. She never came back. There’s no one else. So, our family of misfits can stay there.’

Peter nodded; both his parents were deceased. We were all alone. Skyler put her head on my shoulder and sobbed. I let her stay there. She fell asleep before I could ask her more questions. I never had kids, but I already knew I wouldn’t let anyone hurt her. Never.

We drove so long the sun rose behind us.

‘We drove all night,’ Peter said.

‘Let’s hope we see a lot more sunrises together with our little family here.’

‘Saving Skyler may be the best thing we ever did in our lives.’

‘You’re right and I was wrong about a lot of things, including you. You were brave.’

I saw Peter smile in the rear-view mirror.

‘You are a hero,’ he said.

‘I’m no hero.’ I held back tears. ‘I wish we could have saved the other two.’

‘Me too.’ Peter stared straight ahead. ‘They’ll look for us.’

‘I know.’

Skyler squeezed my hand and the kitten purred as we continued west, away from the rising seas. ‘I’m naming the

kitten Katie. That was the name of the girl who died. I didn't know his name. I didn't know the boy's name. He got sick right away.'

The tears came then. She wiped them away and we sat in silence. It was a sad moment. The saddest I ever known, despite all the miseries I seen in my life.

Later, Skyler placed her head on my shoulder and fell asleep. Her shallow breaths fell into a rhythmic pattern. A feeling came over me that I never experienced before. Maybe it was like how a parent feels about their child. I knew then that I would take care of her like she was my child.

At that moment, I knew what I had been missing in my life and despite all of the darkness in the world, I saw a sliver of light.

William Falo

William Falo studied environmental science at Stockton University. He lives in New Jersey with his family. His fiction has appeared or is forthcoming in *Litro Magazine*, *The Raconteur Review*, *Fragmented Voices*, *Train River's* first fiction anthology, and other literary journals. He can be found on Twitter @williamfalo or Instagram @william.falo.

The Perpetually Dying Woman

Dearest Maud,

Things have not improved between Jack and I. And while the bruises have healed, the scars have not and I keep my arms covered. I thought about what you said and I took some time to think it through before doing anything.

On Friday, sensing something was afoot I suppose, Jack said we should go to the fairground and circus while it was still in town. I must say, I was reluctant, but Jack said the distraction would do us both good and I do so enjoy the circus Maud.

We only got as far as the midway but the noise and atmosphere, that normally filled me with excitement, made my head spin. And the smells from the animal waggons and the sickly scent of cooking food just turned my stomach. Jack bought me a toffee apple but I wasn't in the mood and in my condition I just couldn't eat it and he got cross again. Before I could protest, he dragged me away by the arm saying I was, '...causing a scene again!' and I was forced to pull myself away from him and I ran into the crowd.

I could hear him calling my name and knew he wasn't far behind. I knew then that I hadn't changed my mind about what you and I had discussed. But the circus was no place to think clearly; there was just too many people and too much noise, and so, protecting my stomach, I pushed my way through the crowd intending to go home but I got turned around and found myself by the sideshows.

Hearing Jack shouting over the noise of the calliope I kept my head down and jumped into one of the sideshow tents and soon found myself ushered further in with the crowd. Better to sit down and wait things out in here, I thought, and so I paid my tuppence and went in to watch the show and hide from Jack.

Maud, you won't believe what happened in there, but I swear this is what I saw.

Within the walls of the tent was a heavy velvet curtain, and beyond that, a huge wooden box on a platform with steps leading up to an open door. We all went inside and a parlour had been built in there. The walls had been papered in the French style and it was lit with wall lamps. Around the sides of the parlour were sofas and chairs where we were invited to sit. In the middle of the room were two more chairs and a small table upon which was a silver tray with a jug of water and some glasses on it. There was also a standard lamp behind, and to one side of, the chairs. The noises of the outside world were muffled by the double walls within the tent and could not have sounded farther away. It was like we'd walked through the veil and been transported far away.

Then, through another door at the back of the parlour, the smartly dressed show-runner appeared and thanked us for coming to visit. He spoke for a little while about what was about to happen and then opened the door again and I heard him quietly say, 'Are you ready, Mademoiselle?'

He took the hand of a woman as she walked silently into the room. She was quite small and elegant looking, for all that any of us could see, for she was dressed in a long-sleeved black dress with a small black hat and a veil over her face. She kept her head bowed and her hands inside a black fur muff. He escorted her to one of the chairs in the middle of the room and she sat without a word.

The show-runner introduced the woman as, Mademoiselle Odille Lagrange, and, 'She has a tale to tell. The likes of which you have never heard,' he said.

But first, he needed a volunteer. Someone with medical training. Someone who could take a pulse. Well, I always wanted to be a nurse and had done some training and before I

knew it, my hand went up and I was invited to sit beside the woman in black at the centre of the parlour.

Mlle Lagrange removed her hat and veil and I could now see how beautiful she was. She was quite young, around my age I think but there was a sadness in her eyes and she turned to me and leaning forward said, 'Merci Mademoiselle. Please do not be afraid.'

While the show-runner was talking to the small crowd of people, Mlle Lagrange turned to the table beside her. She placed her hat there and poured herself a glass of water and, watching her, I noticed marks on her neck. They were almost hidden by the lace collar of her dress but there were clearly scars. She caught me looking and I expected her to pull her collar closer, but she didn't seem to care. Then she pulled up the left sleeve of her dress and there was more scarring on her arm. The skin looked melted as if she had once been badly scalded. She didn't look at me.

Then the show-runner asked me to take Mlle Lagrange's left wrist in my right hand and feel for her pulse. I did so and her flesh felt surprisingly cold, like death, Maud.

'Do you feel the pulse Miss?' asks the show-runner. I nodded and he asked me to mark it out with my left hand, 'A visual aid, if you will, for the rest of our gathering.'

So there I sit, holding the French woman's wrist with my right hand and marking out each beat of her pulse with my left. 1..... 2..... 1..... 2..... And so on.

The wall lights were turned down now, leaving just the light from the lamp by the table illuminating Mlle Lagrange and I, and then she began to speak. And she told a story the like of which you never heard. It was a sorrowful tale of love and betrayal and loss that I could not do justice to in this letter but, Maud, it sounded oh so familiar.

Her voice was soft and sad and while she spoke without a tear of the things her lover did, the women in the small crowd could

not control themselves as easily. At first they were just dabbing away tears with their handkerchiefs but soon they began to weep openly while the men shuffled about uncomfortably.

And all the while I marked her pulse. 1..... 2..... 1..... 2..... 1..... 2.....

Her heart-breaking story continued and got sadder yet, the poor child. Even the men were now wiping away tears. Some women, unable to bear any more of Mlle Lagrange's story, left the parlour and even she began to weep.

By now, I could not hold back my own tears. Not least because Odille Lagrange could well have been describing my own life in that soft French accent of hers. Noticing my upset, the show-runner put his hand on my shoulder and whispered for me to continue marking Mlle Lagrange's pulse. I did as I was asked but then, as she spoke, a curious thing began to happen.

Her pulse slowed. 1..... 2..... 1..... 2..... 1..... 2.....

Even now, I don't know how this beautiful little thing could have lived through such a life. The crowd of people were weeping and sobbing, men and women alike, and then her story comes to a horrifying, heart-wrenching conclusion while Mlle Lagrange, sobbing loudly, recounted not just the devastating death that haunted her, but the death of love itself.

And her pulse slowed yet further. 1..... 2..... 1..... 2..... 1..... 2.....

Mlle Odille Lagrange sobbed yet more and could hardly speak by now, just as we could hardly bear to listen to any more of this tale.

Her pulse slowed yet further. 1..... 2.....
1..... 2..... 1.....
2.....

Slower still. 1..... 2.....
1.....

And then, nothing.

I looked at the sobbing woman whose wrist I was holding and then she gasped once or twice, threw back her head, clutched her chest and slumped lifeless into her seat.

Well Maud, I don't mind telling you, I went pale and looked at the show-runner for assistance. There's no pulse, I told him, I think she's dead.

I didn't know what to do. The people in the crowd all started murmuring and whispering like I was in on it or something, despite my pleading looks. But the show-runner says to them, 'Please come up, check for yourselves.' And so they do.

One by one they check her wrists, and feel the cold flesh of her face. One of them put his ear to her mouth to listen for breathing but there was nothing. One woman even stuck her with a hat pin to see if she would squeal but she didn't stir.

It was quite clear to everyone, that Mlle Odille Lagrange was dead.

Dead from a broken heart.

Save for the sobbing, there was silence amongst those who remained and people took to the seats to compose themselves. Men and women looked to each other for comfort while the show-runner seemed to melt into the darkness, leaving us to our thoughts for a minute or two.

And then, a gasp from the dead woman startled everyone!

As life filled her once more, Mlle Lagrange began to sob and moan louder than ever. And through the tears she finished her dreadful story. From the black fur muff on her lap she pulled a slender knife, still stained with blood. The very knife, she explained, that was used to steal motherhood from her and which she had later used to stab her hateful, murderous lover through the heart.

And now her own heart is broken. So broken that she is forever cursed with the pain for the rest of her days. Neither alive nor dead.

Such is the life of Mademoiselle Odille Lagrange: The Perpetually Dying Woman.

I couldn't go home straight away, not after all that. So I wandered the streets for hours thinking about that poor woman and what she had been through, and what I had been through. And wondered if it was all worth it.

I thought I knew what I wanted but now I wasn't so sure.

It was late when I got home and Jack was asleep and reeking of gin, as usual. I stood there for a while, looking at him, thinking about what we had talked about, what I had planned.

But I couldn't do it Maud. I just couldn't. I didn't want to end up cursed like that poor French woman. Caught between worlds, never knowing happiness for the rest of my life.

So, being careful not to wake Jack, I reached down the side of the bed and took out the knife I had hidden there that morning. And I put it away. Then I packed, Maud. I packed as much as I could as quickly and as quietly as I could and I walked away.

There's a train first thing and I'll be on it before Jack notices I'm gone. He'll be too hungover to think straight anyway. I'll have my baby somewhere safe and peaceful, maybe by the seaside. And you'll come and stay with us Maud. We deserve to be happy.

See you soon.

Sarah

Mr Uku

Mr Uku is a UK based writer of unusual fiction and poetry. When not writing, he can usually be found enjoying a slice of cake and a glass of cherry brandy.

Wonderful Life

Guest Story from the Editors

Sand screeched beneath Allardice's tiny feet. She had grown accustomed to the scraping feeling in the spaces between her toes. Every few paces Arno's huge arm scratched hers; his skin was dark and abrasive. Once, he even held her hand a moment, but he was clumsy, foolish, and she suckered him in like a blue-ringed octopus.

'So, you have papers sorted?' he asked Allardice. 'Now you can stay Mozambique?'

Her *Black Label* swung loosely by the neck, pinched between her right thumb and forefinger. Raising her arm slowly, she upended it and took a long swig. Wet lips reflected the sunset.

'Tomorrow my jeep fixed,' Arno said. 'I take you again to jetty while I fish? I try not be stung by jellyfish this time.' He forced a laugh.

Allardice held up the bottle, saw that it was almost empty, and drained the last mouthful. She rested it against her bare chest, just above the outrageous pattern of her market-bought top, and her pale skin pimpled. Arno swallowed as his chest and crotch tightened.

'I need another drink,' she said.

Baobab Beach was lined on both sides with bars – sand bars to the east and drinking bars to the west. The latter were starting to fill up now as folks waited for the supermoon; that June it was supposed to be closer and fuller than ever.

'Yes, I get.' Arno bee-lined for the nearest wooden walkway.

He clomped up a dozen steps to a raised platform bar and dove into the crowd. Allardice took her time, kept half a dozen paces behind, and moved across the decking to take the only free seat. She lounged very precisely, enjoying appreciative looks from three locals, one of whom she recognised; he knew what

she liked and disappeared into the shabby mass at the bar, just as Arno reappeared holding two drinks. He didn't see Allardice at first, and she watched with satisfaction as he searched for her, wild-eyed. When he eventually saw her, his shoulders relaxed.

'I bring Black Label,' he said, 'and Sex on the Beach,' he added, hopefully. 'I not know what you want.'

'I like both.'

He nodded, set them both down on the table, and stood beside her. Allardice swivelled in her chair to face out towards the Indian Ocean and rested her feet on the wooden banister. Behind her now, Arno remained attentive. When the local returned, he set a third drink down on Allardice's table and called her Kaya. Arno faltered, but only for a second. In an attentive manner, he encouraged the young man to make himself scarce – a task he was well-built for.

When they were alone again, save for the dozens crowded around, Arno crouched to be level with Allardice.

'Why he call you Kaya?'

'I've no idea.'

Arno faltered again.

'Maybe he confuse you with someone else?'

She looked out at the black water, lying still and flat against the distant horizon; the breaking of waves on the screechy sand below her was loud and terrifying.

By ten o'clock, the supermoon bled across the sky. Amidst the heavy chatter, they were silent. A young couple beside them left and Allardice stood up to take their place leaning over the wooden banister; Arno fell in beside her. He beamed suddenly and mimed the coiling of rope, flexing his forearms.

'What you want, Elna? You want moon? Say yes and I rope it for you.' He whirled the invisible lasso above his head and threw it into the bloodshot night. 'Hey. Good idea. I give you moon, Elna.'

For a moment, Allardice couldn't help herself.

‘I’ll take it,’ she said. ‘Then what?’

‘Then you eat and you get moon-fingers and moon-toes and moon-hair.’ Arno’s over-white teeth flashed as he spoke, as if the moon was in his smile too. ‘And we have wonderful life.’

The crowds were still chattering, but now so were they.

‘That what you want?’ he asked.

Allardice looked at him, knowing he didn’t mean the moon. Then she looked at her three empties.

‘I need another drink,’ she said.

Pearlescent fish lay parallel to each other, lined up in rows along wooden benches. Shaded from early sunlight by tin roofs on wooden stilts, they gawped with open mouths at market-goers, and waited to be taken home for lunch. Allardice liked the smell of fish; she skimmed past, smiled at the fishmonger.

‘No fish today, Retha?’ he asked.

‘Not today, Kofi,’ she said. ‘I’m going fishing.’

‘Ah!’ He laughed. ‘You put me out of business!’

She waved and moved on.

Further along, huge mounds of fruit sat in wicker baskets, under plastic tarps and on wooden tables. Three young men stood by, peddling against time and heat. Allardice didn’t recognise them; she mentally labelled them the three musketeers: fruiterer, costermonger, and greengrocer.

‘Hey pretty lady!’ one of them said. ‘You need apples? Lemons? Grapes? Nice breakfast for nice lady!’

She liked him.

Choosing an apple, she produced a handful of copper-plated centavos, embossed with rhinos and leopards, and clinked them one-by-one into his hand – more than the apple cost. Even his calloused palm made her skin look ghostly-white.

‘For you,’ she said.

He beamed.

‘I like you, pretty lady,’ he said. ‘What your name?’

A moment’s pause.

‘Mary,’ she said.

‘Pretty name for pretty lady.’ He held out his hand for her to shake.

People here never shook hands, but if she gave a European name they would always offer. She took it; his skin grated hers.

‘My name Alu.’

‘Nice to meet you.’

‘You just visit?’

‘Yes. I’m leaving soon.’

‘You come buy fruit again?’

‘Maybe.’

‘Here.’ He handed her a punnet of grapes.

‘Thank you.’

‘Now you come buy fruit again?’

‘Yes.’ She smiled. ‘I’ll come back tomorrow.’

‘Ok! See you tomorrow pretty Mary!’

Allardice waved goodbye, stole another apple from Alu when he wasn’t looking, and left the market behind.

When she reached Arno’s home, in a wealthier part of town, she had eaten both apples and all the grapes. The short track to his shack was flanked by a dozen head-high trees, each with leaves wide enough to protect her from the sun. Hot dust billowed beneath her feet and stuck to her legs. He was already waiting by his jeep and beamed when she appeared.

‘Hello Elna,’ he said. ‘You ready for fish?’

Allardice nodded and climbed into the jeep. Arno got behind the wheel, started the engine, grinned again, and headed for the jetty. The journey took 25 minutes – an easily walkable distance, but Arno refused to let Allardice walk anywhere when he could chauffeur her. Besides the engine, the only sound she could hear was Arno’s hands scraping the wheel.

As ever, the jetty was empty aside from his tin-bath-boat; that was why Arno had started using it. It was further along the sand bars, so navigating out into deeper water was more difficult, but it allowed them more privacy. The jetty itself was a handful of planks held together by even fewer nails. Allardice had never stepped foot on it.

Arno killed the engine, left the keys in the ignition, and clambered out. With practiced ease, he slipped the battered cool-box and rickety fold-up chair out of the back – food, drink and furniture for his Elna – and set them up on the sand in front of the jetty. She sat down while he checked the boat, planks creaking ominously beneath him.

‘Water just right,’ he said, looking out at the sand bars. ‘I must go now.’

Allardice nodded. Arno turned back and paced over to her.

‘I be back,’ he said, standing awkwardly. ‘Not be long.’

She nodded again and looked him in the eye. His expression shifted; he opened his mouth to say more, but Allardice stood up and he paused. She closed the gap between them – slow, purposeful strut – and pecked him on the cheek, lips soft against his tough skin.

He beamed, nodded, and turned back to the water. Springing into his tin-bath-boat, he was soon navigating the sand bars with blissful ease, tides all going his way. Allardice waited until he had reached deeper waters. He was only a few hundred metres away, but it had taken him half an hour to get there.

Only then did she pack the fold-up chair and cool-box back into the jeep, start the engine, and drive away.

The Portuguese Man o’ War – named because of its resemblance to 18th century Portuguese warships under full sail – isn’t actually a jellyfish. It is a species of siphonophore closely related to jellyfish. Their balloons are sometimes blue, violet, or pink,

and float on the water's surface. They are propelled by winds and currents and can drift in blooms of over 1000 strong, laying colourful blankets across the ocean. Their tentacles hang below them, up to 100 feet long, covered in venomous barbs designed to paralyse and kill fish and crustaceans.

Arno didn't know any of this; to him, they were just jellyfish. He watched the jetty empty from his helpless distance, then looked down into the water, translucent-blue between pink balloon heads, and saw tentacles extending into the deeper, darker waters.

They looked calm, easy.

He plunged his hand into the water and grabbed a fistful of tentacle, screamed as it wrapped around his forearm.

The pink balloon head bobbed.

Shrieking, Arno held on until he felt like his arm would explode. He finally released his grip, snatched his arm out of the water, shook the tentacles loose. They plopped back into the vast ocean. Whip-like welts cascaded across his skin, somehow more painful now than when the tentacles had had him.

The pink balloon head stilled.

Clutching his arm, he fell back into his tin-bath-boat and cried.

Ross Turner

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Superlative – The Short Story Literary Journal
2020 Issue – New Beginnings



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