



ALL YOUR STORIES ANTHOLOGY

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A FEAST OF FICTION IN THIS ISSUE

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All Your Stories Anthology Magazine

A selection of fiction stories from
International Authors



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WELCOME to the September Issue of the anthology magazine. You will see that we have a feast of fiction for you in this edition and hope you enjoy the varied and thought-provoking stories that have been selected.

As always, we ask that you share and purchase so everyone who enjoys reading can appreciate the magazine.

Our next issue will be in December with deadline on 18th November, we welcome submissions at any time, and we are looking for Christmas/Winter themed pieces.

Check and follow the guidelines which can be found at the end of this issue and on the website.

All Your Poems will also be publishing their next edition in December so if you write poetry, please check our guidelines and send in your submissions by the 18th November.

Ed.

www.allyourstoriesandpoems.com

FICTION SHORT STORIES

David Lyons has two novels published to date, "The Dream Voyagers" (2015), and "Land of Butterflies" (2023). His book of eighteen short stories titled "The Muse and Other Stories" and my latest novel "The Truth Will Out" are currently with an agent. He has just completed a new children's book titled "Mangata". His short stories have appeared in many publications worldwide.

LAST SUMMER'S EVENING by David Lyons ©

It was one of those summer's evenings that you'd wish would never end – the sun sitting low in the sky casting long shadows across the freshly mown grass and the yawning flowers. The bees buzzing, filled with the conscientiousness of their task, taking their last few nibbles at the petals for the day. In the distance a lone unseen pigeon singing "take two you fool, take two" to many an eagerly listening ear. Far off in the fluttering haze of the evening the sound of a hay bailer churning out its births of amber lightly tied bales added the only anxiety to the moments. The barbecue was cold now and sat waiting to be put away as the tired old sheep dog lay beneath wagging his tail, lifting a small cloud of dust from the arid dry gravel – his eyes closed but fully aware of all about him. He was content at having finished off the last of the lambchops and sweet potatoes, leaving no room for the now cold apple pie that was the primary focus of all wasps and bluebottles in proximity. The aroma of the honeysuckle bush that took so many years to train over the back door filled the air with that unique smell of summer. The scented stock of tall purple stems was awakening for the night and began to rival the honeysuckle's control of the senses. Then surrounding colourful flower beds, mostly of begonias, had been given a drink as the lamb cooked and now raised their heads in full glory in a grateful reverent thank you.

Two timber director's chairs with green cloth backs and seats were either side of a small wicker table that was bought by impulse from Habitat when they used to have a store on St. Stephen's Green. That small table seemed like a foolish buy at the time as I carried it through the Saturday crowds to a distant carpark, with its spindly iron legs and a top that could collapse without warning, until it got a little modification. But it found so many uses over the years, on seaside picnicks in Strandhill and on pilgrimage days at Knock, but its most esteemed function was as Dad's mealtime table when he became ill.

My mother and I sat together quietly, our empty plates and desert dishes leaving just enough room on its surface for our wine glasses and Mam's favourite bottle of San Valentine. Dad had died four years previously and was on both our minds as we looked at the empty space where he would have been seated. He would always come out with a line of conversation we both wanted to hear – one that would always bring a laugh or a fond recollection of an activity from yester year. Stories I imagined I would have retained better but sadly have been diluted a little in such a short space of time. His absence left a void that nothing could fill, and at best the days after were occupied by actions that tried to mimic past times of pure perfection that were now lost forever and indeed futile to even attempt to replicate.

Many isolated silent tears were shed by us, not wishing to cause upset to either party, but brave smiles tried to hide what sad eyes could never deny. That evening after our second glass of wine Mam began to speak fondly of her past, her childhood, her old friends and family. Of course, over the years I had heard all these names and places mentioned but not with the same level of recollection and feeling as on that summer's evening. Her eyes were far away as she spoke of cousins that were vaguely familiar to me but were seemingly only now of significant importance to her. People I knew she hadn't met in fifty years were spoken of as though she were with them that morning. I tried not to think too much into her change of attitude and followed the stories with great interest, laughing and at times watching Mam allow a tear to form in her eyes, as she lived out similar joyful summer's evenings long ago. She told me of the game of "Jack Stones" she used to play as a child with her friends in her father's farmyard and at the whitewashed wall of her old schoolhouse. When I failed to understand how the game was played, Mam showed me, holding three or four pebbles in her pale hands with their long slender fingers. She would toss them in a fashion and catch them again in one hand as she did seventy years previously, still with the same unforgotten precision. I tried to imitate her actions but failed each time and the more I tried the worse my attempts became. Mam laughed at my pathetic endeavours and showed me over and over, each time carrying out the ritual herself with exact perfection, never once allowing a pebble to fall to the ground. The pebbles she used were ones she kept in the corner of a flowerpot for decoration and were collected by her on the damp sands of Garretstown Beach. Small round pebbles formed by thousands of years of crashing waves and an eternity of rolling to the whim of the currents on the bottom of the seabed. Those thousands of years of formation were destined only for these few moments in Mam's pale hands.

"There's no fun anymore since Dad has gone. Is there?" Mam said after a long silence. She looked out to the distance as if wishing to see his image come walking slowly across the fields towards home, as he used to do. Hands behind his back and his cap pulled down low over his eyes, always with a story of a fence that was in dire need of repair on some boundary or other. In the heat mist of that evening, I also felt I could, in my mind's eye, see him walking towards us and instinctively could feel his presence nearby.

"Do you think so?" I replied knowing only too well what Mam meant.

She just nodded and tossed her head in a forlorn fashion and began to stand up slowly. We tidied everything away and I wheeled the barbecue into a shed and a strange feeling came over me that made me unsure if it would ever be used again. That was seven years ago now and it has never been moved from that shed or used since.

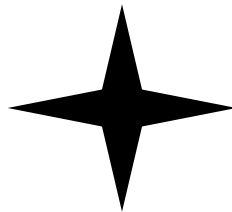
That night Mam was convinced the man who reads the nine-o'clock news was listening to what we were saying and wondered why I had invited him into the house. My heart almost burst with fear.

"How could he?" I tried to normalise a situation I knew was just the beginning of something horrific.

"He is listening, and you asked him in here" Mam said with a look I didn't recognise – a look I had never seen before – a disbelief in me that I had never experienced in the past. Her eyes stared at me as though I were a stranger. Eyes that had only ever given loving and admiring looks

in my direction, now glared at me like I was an enemy. The weakness and terror I experienced in these moments will never leave me and I will never forget.

I lay in bed that night a cold sweat covering my face, never once allowing my eyes to close. My mind raced through a thousand thoughts, unsure of what had just happened, all the while hoping it was just a one off and by tomorrow morning all would be back to normal again and Mam would be her old self once more. I heard a rumbling, a clattering, unfamiliar sounds even for daylight hours and I turned my head to look at the clock. The hands pointed to three thirty, Monday morning, and it was black dark outside. A wind had picked up overnight and the top stable door banged without mercy over and over. My bedroom door opened, and Mam was standing there in her grey tweed suit and brown hat, holding her handbag in one hand and her brown leather gloves in the other. "You had best get up or we will be late for eleven o'clock mass. It's Sunday morning you know".



Stephanie V Sears is a French and American ethnologist, essayist, journalist, poet whose writings have been published in a broad range of magazines spanning many countries: *Insula* (UNESCO), *Eco hustler*, *Zoomorphic*, *Wildlifeextra.com*, *The London Grip*, *The Journal of Wild Culture*.....and other international literary journals. She has recently turned to short story writing: four recent stories have been published by *Egophobia*, *Litcafe*, *The Brussels Review* and *Scars* magazines

Octavio by Stephanie V Sears ©

I saw the man through a gap in the crowd, at Zaragoza's train station. Then he vanished, engulfed by the crowd.

Did I actually see that face, or was it a figment of my imagination? Did he, actually, in that brief instant, stare back with something of an 'alas'?

The shaking of my body seemed to confirm the reality of it. What personality, I asked myself, came with such a face? Was it possessed of wisdom, poise, and vigor?

I knew I had seen something remarkable and immediately felt a yearning to catch another glimpse. In vain, I searched the entrance hall of the station where the dim mass of people passed by my eyes like a patchwork...except for one form sitting on a bench not far away. A woman

whose gaunt, alert face stuck out incongruously from the bundle of indescribable clothes and scarves that made her thick and shapeless. For a fraction of a second, her wry eye met mine, giving the impression that she knew my thoughts. A gypsy, most probably. Many lived in Spain; and no one else would stare with such brazen familiarity.

Of these two people, the man seemed most destined to engrave himself upon my memory.

Memory, however, is a shifty, ever shuffled thing, and reality, not forcibly a matter of objectivity.

His image lingered on for a while, as well my hope to see him again. Then, at some point, without my noticing it, I forgot him. His features gradually melted away, their characterization dissipating.

But something must have endured, an embryo of longing suspended in the amniotic fluid of the brain's bank.

The present keeps me absorbed by a new encounter.

His name is Octavio. His charm equal his looks. He seems able to reach into my thoughts with boundless understanding. Though we share no common semantics, I am sure that we understand each other by means of a perfect permeability of mind. A fluid of telepathy links us. Dare I say it? The instant we set eyes on each other we became as if inseparable.

In fact, I consider Octavio so superior in wisdom, kindness and beauty that it humbles me. He seems to be the most achieved being I have ever encountered. I am even inclined to see him as supernatural. And since he can only be described in superlatives, his mystery remains intact. I may never know just how intelligent and perceptive he is. Yet, by some unusual power of spirit, he gives joy and defeats darkness.

It is a cool October morning on our first meeting. Incipient rain flavors the air with the taste of evergreen and moss, with the pervasive eeriness of a fairytale stuck in a bewitched, timeless interval. The smell of moist earth from the downpour of the preceding night, the mottled grey sky outlining pines and cedars, indeed casts a spell of another kind of congruity, in which human imagination falls short. I have come to wonder whether I am where I think I am. Perhaps I have been absconded to an elsewhere where only Octavio and I co-exist. No one else seems to be around though I have an appointment. Perhaps we exist only within the illuminated pages of a thick vellum volume. A faint unease grips me. No matter. I could stand here with him, forever - in this jumbled nostalgia for chivalry, invincible love, enchanted gardens... held there in a smell of oats, hay and Octavio's own warm musk.

For it must be said that Octavio is an eight year-old pure-bred Spanish stallion I discovered while inspecting this equestrian school, stall by stall. His name and birth date seem to have been hastily written in red paint on his stall door, as if he had arrived unexpectedly. He stands out from the other horses there, which, I imagine, have either lost their fire in the course of being mounted by unskilled riders, or never possessed.

Octavio appears entirely unfit for such a weary destiny. He is full of beans, friendly, in his prime. His coat is a smoky dappled grey, his head, notably Spanish, with a long straight nose tapering finely at the chiselled nostrils, accentuated by a long witch's mane streaked with silver and coal. Like the floor-length tail, the mane tumbles down to his elbow on one side and fetchingly veils one almond eye. The thick, lustrous neck arches gracefully. His proportions impart great strength and a formal elegance.

I am here to write an article on riding opportunities in the Barcelona area. In the day's poetic gloom, he is my savior. My dismal prospect is to write a detailed report about four equestrian schools. With Octavio, I have lost all incentive to embark on this job.

Entering his stall, I lose all sense of time. Ever so lightly, we brush heads together, breathe each other in. My arms wrap around his neck with, I admit, more than a hint of possessiveness. Even when I say nothing, his ears, pointed towards me, seem to listen. I have the distinct impression that he follows my thoughts. Enraptured, I have forgotten to wonder why no one has come to meet me for the interview. My appointment is at eleven.

I caught the train at eight am for the twenty minute ride from Barcelona. Then walked the fifteen minutes uphill to the club, arriving well ahead of time. No one has yet appeared to meet me. No one, in fact, seems to be here. Only Octavio and the other horses. Perhaps I should head over to the main building and make myself known. The small chalet-like structure stands on a slope some fifty meters from the stable. Like the other structures on the property, it appears to have plopped down from somewhere, I could not say where, by force of some capricious and opportunistic willpower.

The stable is clean, well aired; the stalls are spacious, sweet-smelling. This proves that someone must work here. But does it? Near the stable is a large outdoor arena with a ten-gradient stand and stairs on one side, leading up to the levels. Another building on the opposite side of the stable holds a smaller indoor ring for rainy days. The grounds are scantily grassed, not quite abandoned, though not well maintained. I have the persistent notion of some intermediary state of being, as if I, the horse, and the whole place were stuck in some other writer's block..

What circumstances have brought Octavio to a school so evidently inferior to him?

It is precisely as I am asking myself this question, that a sharp-featured middle-aged woman appears, walking towards me from the chalet. Her saffron complexion, the effect of chain-smoking, or excessive sun exposure. It lends her face a sternness, soon dispelled, however, by the honeyed manner of a souk salesman or a gypsy fortune-teller. Finding me with Octavio, she smiles knowingly, introduces herself as Senora Madura, the very one that I made an appointment with by telephone.

'Let's take him out to have a better look', she suggests, not bothering to slip a halter over his head but instead, leading him by hand flat on his neck. As a matter of fact, Octavio is perfectly docile.

In the ring, thrilled by the cool temperature and the sudden spaciousness, he bursts into a canter, stops abruptly, pivots in the opposite direction, repeats the action, petulantly bucking now and then. Suddenly, as if he were being ridden, he performs a few perfect flying lead

changes. Beside me by the rail, Senora Madura chuckles and sighs with satisfaction at his prowess. In her rasping voice, she enumerates his skills in dressage and jumping. Informs me that Octavio is for sale in case I would like to buy him.

If only I could!

I strongly suspect that she has spied on me from the chalet windows.

The truth is, I feel my life mysteriously bound to Octavio, even though I cannot have him. Out of curiosity, I ask what price she, or whoever else, is asking for him. The amount is out of my reach and no wishful thinking can change that. *So be it, let someone else take him*, I philosophize. This appeases me momentarily. Anyway, had I had the money, I wouldn't have the sedentary life needed. A horse like Octavio requires a deep, quasi marital commitment.

My fascination does not subside, however. Octavio's outdoor performance makes him irresistible. Senora Madura relentlessly vaunts his qualities, putting forward my special connection with him. I am, in her view, the "right" person for him. How does she know? This notion seems to have taken possession of her; to supersede all practical consideration of my financial capability.

'Why is he for sale?' I ask, vaguely suspicious. For, why do I sense some undefinable alliance between this strange woman and the horse, something beyond my grasp?

'It is what it is. What will be will be', she replies, fulfilling her persona as a fortune-teller. What to retort to such sibylline language? A sense of helplessness or fear keeps me from pressing her. I remind myself that I want to come back the next day to see Octavio again.

I have nearly forgotten my initial goal in coming here, to Senora Madura's amusement. She reminds me and, reluctantly, I extricate a pad and pen from my bag. She embarks on a litany about the club: the number of horses, the lessons offered. I need only listen and scribble notes. Though it is amply clear that neither of us are taking this interview seriously. She even smirks at one point, as I take my notes.

I wonder how the school survives. I've still seen no lesson taking place, no one riding at all, no one working in the stable or elsewhere. Is Senora Madura the owner, or simply, the manager of this nonchalant enterprise? Does she own Octavio? She doesn't say, I don't ask. As if some self-protective instinct were telling me not to pry, not to destroy the mood, though it is precisely what I am here for. The truth is, I am afraid to probe too deeply, as if I might fall through some imaginary floor into a chasm of aberration.

'Isn't he stupendous!?' Senora Madura exclaims, as if to deflect my pondering. I can only assent. Yet I venture to ask:

'Aren't there a lot of people interested in buying him?'

'You two are made for each other', she replies in a kind of *non sequitur*.

I am on the verge of confessing that she is wasting her time. Yet her conviction is compelling, almost convincing.

I take photographs of Octavio.

'it won't do,' she says immediately,' you can't use them for your story. He's not one of the club horses.'

I nod.

As we part, she informs me that a potential buyer is coming from Madrid in two days, mid-morning. There is a hint of provocation in her tone. Her ploy works. Needled by jealousy, I will make a point of being there, just to see this buyer.

The following morning is sunny and dry. I did not tell Senora Madura that I would come back. Yet something tells me that she knew and will be spying on me from the chalet window.

The stallion greets me with touching exuberance and I wonder if he foresees our parting. Perversely, I decide to test his affection. Outside his stall by the stable door, is a whitewashed wall on which the sun glares. I climb the stairs to the first landing to the arena's bleachers, and there, the sun at my back projects my silhouette onto the white wall. Promptly, Octavio recognizes my outline and raises a storm. When I go back to him, he greets me with a reproachful nudge and a throaty nicker. Apart from the other horses, the place is still deserted. I feel Senora Madura's invisible presence and cannot dispel the impression that Octavio, she and I co-exist in a bubble outside of what is commonly known as reality.

Octavio's wild clamors accompany my departure around midday, and I wonder anew if he understands that tomorrow is our last day.

That evening, I discover that my pictures of Octavio are blurred beyond recognition. For some reason, I am not surprised. That night I dream that Octavio is mine and I wake up with a feeling of elation. I leave home around eight thirty and from the station walk up to the club with incomprehensible excitement. The air is fragrant with the dry scent of cypress and myrtle. Birds are singing jubilantly in the hedges. I go to Octavio's stall: it is empty. He is not in the outdoor ring either. Surely, Senora Madura will bring him out from somewhere to show him off to the Madrid buyer. I wait at the rail, expectant yet filled with a kind of exhaustion.

Behind me, two voices approach, conversing pleasantly. Not turning to face them, I let them come nearer. The clear tenor of one contrasts sharply with Senora Madura's familiar laryngitic bass. I have the distinct impression of being stared at by that tenor. Quite sure that I never heard it before, I find it oddly familiar. It provokes me, presses on my brain, needles my memory, demands recognition. I cannot distinguish their conversation clearly.

'You two don't need introductions', I hear Senora Madura say from right behind me.

I feel a tap, a nudge. Is it Octavio?

He smiles over me, his face long and noble, the dark wavy hair prematurely silvered, a face that my memory has suddenly reclaimed from its secret niche. Indeed, he seems to expect recognition. He reminds me of a fine horse. The image of a horse lingers in my brain, blurring some sort of boundary as I smell the grass under my supine body. I must have fallen.... Fallen asleep, fainted. This helps me to place a last piece in a puzzle that I unknowingly started.

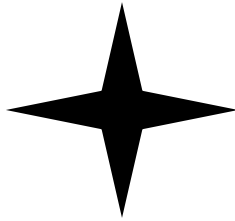
'Octavio Clemente,' he pulls me up from the ground. 'The color is coming back', he informs me. 'I don't think you remember me yet,' he adds with a grin.

'I remember...the Zaragoza train station,' I say, as if to myself,'... and that woman on a bench', I add, looking around for Senora Madura. She has vanished. Reality is a funny thing. I am quite alone with Octavio Clemente.

Or am I? For I feel the gypsy woman's overarching presence everywhere, in that evanescent realm of her craft.

'I am the new owner of the club,' he informs me. 'Soon we will have this place up and going.'

'Oh, you are! I mutter, fearing that he too may vanish at any moment.



Steve Draper. A graduate of St. Catherine's college Oxford, I have spent most of my working life in education.

I have also written music reviews and previews for the Yorkshire Post, dealing with concerts in Sheffield and West Yorkshire. I have been writing short and full-length fiction for some years and am part of a writers' group called Sheffield Novelists.

The Thing Inside you by Steve Draper ©

"For all time, and for all people," she said.'

'Who said...?'

'You know, the lady at Shakespeare's birthplace.'

They're doing their Saturday night relaxation after a day trip to Stratford – his idea – in front of their open fire – also his idea.

'My feet hurt.'

'Then or now?'

'Both.'

'Anyway,' Craig massages Lindy's right foot which she conveniently places on his lap, 'I think I want *you* for all time.'

'No. You wouldn't want to be with me for eternity - you'd probably get tired of being with *yourself* for eternity; think about it.'

'That's what I was doing,' he turns his attention to her left foot, 'as far as the human mind can comprehend eternity, that's what I want. But I don't want to share you with other people too much.'

'You're going to have to share me a great deal.'

'What? Oh.'

She moves his hand to her rounded belly. They both feel a little kick - the lightest brush of a baby's foot. They stare at each other, awed for a moment, and then resume their relaxed contemplation of the cheerful flames.

'Yes, but who's to say there is no eternity for us?' he continues.

'This 'us',' she always relishes this sort of intimate philosophising, 'This eternal soul, when does it start?'

'When we're born.'

'So this little bump, this man or woman to be, has no soul.'

'I don't know..., not yet any way.'

'So when does it arrive? Half way down the birth canal? When the head pokes out, or when the feet leave?'

'Now you're just being silly.' He trots the phrase out, half smiling.

'No, seriously,' she pulls his head down to the cushion of her lap to show it's an affectionate discussion, not one of their slightly-more-frequent-of-late arguments, 'When?'

'I suppose it comes gradually as you grow up.'

'And goes gradually as you grow old.'

They both know she's talking about his mother.

'Maybe...'

'It's a bit unfair then if you die after years of Alzheimer's, because you're only left with half a soul for eternity. Sorry..., sorry.'

It has slipped out and he'll be annoyed, so she does her best to make up for it and raises him up so she can kiss him; properly.

'It's all right,' he says a few minutes later, 'It's a fair point, but let's suppose you're right and there is no soul. We'd just be a mix of chemicals, you know - hormones and things, reacting to whatever stimulus comes our way in a predetermined fashion.'

'That's what David Hume said, sort of.'

'So we have no moral responsibility for our actions.'

'Did you read that Galen Strawson that I gave you?'

'Umm...no-oh.'

'Well then.'

There is a wordless agreement to disagree and he pokes at the fire.

'So, I suppose we'd better go up.'

'That's what my hormones are telling me to do.'

'You mean making you do.'

'Very funny.'

Craig wakes first. A thin slice of sunlight has crept in with the winter morning and lies across Lindy's cheek; he thinks about kissing the softly glowing skin. Yes she *is* blooming, as one of his friends had said she would - changes in hormone levels apparently. But he decides that she would probably prefer a lie in and creeps downstairs. It looks like a lovely day and he really fancies a walk in the frosty sunshine, so he needs her to wake up refreshed.

It works. After he's plied her with freshly baked croissants and the awful liquorice tea she drinks at the moment, she agrees - no hills mind you. So they walk along the river, sharing in the stillness of the frozen reeds and the lightening-blue speed of a Kingfisher which stops them suddenly.

'Fast forward or freeze frame,' he says.

'What?'

'Yes,' he warms to his theme, 'We can fast forward, we can play, we can pause even - as we're doing - but we can't rewind.'

'I don't want to rewind.'

'Nor do I. But it's a pity if you press fast forward too much, because you miss things and you can't go back. I just want to press play. With you.'

They pause some more, till she says.

'Shall we get married then?' She has her head on his shoulder.

'Will you be mine for all time?'

'Yes, yes, you old softie; all the time I have, I give to you.'

'And all your worldly goods.'

'Them too.'

His heart has wings all through Monday's intrusions; all through the paperwork and the dreary meetings. But it falls to earth as he opens the door and sees her face - he's forgotten the hospital appointment.

'I'm so sorry. I... It was very busy.'

She makes no response, and it's obvious there's something more.

'Was there...,' guilt and fear trip him up, 'Was there a problem?'

'The baby has Down's Syndrome. It's definite.'

'What?'

She hands him the paper with the bare facts.

'But they said....'

'It's definite.'

'We haven't even talked about it.'

'There's nothing to talk about.'

He resists the temptation to say, 'Of course there is,' and offers to make a cup of tea instead.

In need of occupation and a rekindling, if only symbolic, of the weekend's emotions, he lights the fire again, but there's no cheer in it. She seems to have shrunk into herself, joining the baby and excluding him. He treads carefully around her until, over a second cup, he decides it's time.

'I know it's difficult, but we need to come to a decision.'

'I'm keeping it.'

'Umm, I can understand your feelings, but...'

'Don't patronise me.'

'Sorry, umm... we need to... can we talk about the implications?'

'While you've been so *busy* at work, I've been considering *the implications*.' His words are repeated and stressed with gravelly irony. 'Yes, ever since the talk about my age, the screening and the letter telling me there was the possibility.'

Intentionally or not, the words are raising his heart rate, but still he resists the urge to say, 'I want to talk to you, not your hormones,' or ask, 'Who's being patronising now?' He takes a deep breath. 'Can I say what I think?'

'Go on then.'

'I think it would be kinder to..., ' and that's as far as he gets before they have the most serious row ever. Selfishness - they accuse each other. He, apparently, has never really wanted children, and now can't face the responsibility of fatherhood; all he's worried about is his career. She, according to him, thinks that because she is the mother, because she is actually carrying the child, their child, because she has friends in the philosophy department, she is in sole charge of their futures, his future even.

'Love,' she spits the hateful words out, 'What did that love of yours 'for all time' mean? Eternity? You're a fraud; it just meant a couple of days, till you found out you would have to give up a bit of your freedom. No, wait. I know what you think the problem is - the poor baby is going to be born with only half a soul.'

They are both beyond reason, and he shouts, 'No, I only want you to apply some logic, the sort of logic you always accuse me of lacking. There *is* no soul, according to you, so why can't you agree that the *thing* inside you isn't going to have an easy or happy life and can easily be replaced with another little collection of cells?'

'Because I love it..., my baby.' She is shouting too now. 'And if you can't love us, you can piss off and leave us alone.'

'Right,' he gets up, unable to take any more, 'I will then,' and fumbles with the sleeves of his thick fleece.

'If you walk out now, don't expect me to be here when you get back.'

The old door won't slam, so he pulls it to viciously and walks out into the quiet street. It's dark and frosty, but he doesn't notice the full moon dividing the world into silver and charcoal, or the post rush-hour hush over the small town. He moves from self-justification to self-pity, but always there is a nagging worry. What did she mean when she said, 'Don't expect me to be here when you get back.' Is she, right now, packing her things and ordering a taxi? And what will it mean if she is?

At last the walk has metabolised the adrenaline; act of instinct and act of will coincide and he reaches for his mobile. Shit, he left it behind in his hurry to punish her by walking out. He turns to go back to the cosy worker's cottage they both love; he breaks into a run, but of course he's too late, and she's not there.

Her rage has also overridden common sense and taken her angrily out of doors. She has thought of packing her bag, but has decided the best way to punish him is to leave him guessing. She heads in the opposite direction, out of town towards the mill on the river, but *her* clearing brain brings misery too. She's been feeling out of touch with her friends and colleagues in the department anyway, marooned on this island of expectation, and with a baby that would need decades of support, she might be cut off forever. Yet she can't escape this unborn love; the opening of herself that she is half dreading and half yearning for. Nor does she want to. He doesn't care though, doesn't love her enough even to try and understand.

She has reached the weir by the mill where the thunderous drama of water in spate drowns her sense of reality, and she struggles to direct her thoughts, so that bitter disappointment kills love. She wants to, no, needs to hurt him; he's shattered all the hopes of the

close family she has wanted, yes needed as well, to make up for her own cold parents. Couldn't he love an innocent, affectionate child with Down's? Couldn't he at least try? No, he's like all the rest - all fancy talk to get you into bed, and then no depth, no staying power. She could easily end the argument and wound him forever if she jumped in; kill two birds with one stone. Familiar philosophical arguments run around in her head – perhaps she *is* bound to do whatever she's bound to do. Or, perhaps the critical neurons that she's read about so often can be fired one way or the other by some part of her brain, and she *can* decide. She *can* will what she wills.

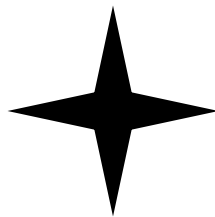
But surely that would mean she does have a non-material existence – a soul. Something, or rather the non-thing, would have to tip the scales one way or the other, unless it was all pure chance, a chaos born of some molecular indeterminacy. She can't decide on the argument or the action but stands staring at the water under the uncaring stars.

In the empty house, he remembers that she has had these spells of fear and despair before, so panic addles his brain. How can he have been so stupid as to walk out? It's not who's wrong or right that matters. It's compromise, it's getting along together, it's supporting her, right or wrong, because it's her that he wants. It's not who has the right to decide about the baby, or whose life and whose time it's going to need - it's love that's important. That's how they can decide.

By the time he finally remembers where he put his mobile, he almost rings his mother by mistake, but finally he presses the right contact. Shit, shit, shit. She doesn't answer. He leaves a loving, apologetic message as calmly as his beating heart will allow, then almost runs to the door. Panic speeds his feet as he follows the route she must have taken.

She's by the narrow walkway across the weir. Bloody hell, she's standing on the old stone wall and he can see little ice-falls hanging from it. She has her back to him and he thinks about calling out, but he doesn't want to startle her, so he walks slowly over the frosted gravel. She hears his footsteps and turns to look, but she loses her balance on the ice. She screams as she slips and falls.

She promised me, for all time, he thinks as he dives in.



Issy Jinarmo is a pen name for writing trio Jill Baggett, Narelle Noppert and Maureen Kelly OAM. We live far apart in Australia and write via email.

Issy has had short stories published in magazines and anthologies from such diverse areas as Australia, India, England and USA.

Some of our stories, which have been published by online magazines, can be read from the Issy Jinarmo Facebook site.

All In a Day's Work by Issy Jinarmo ©

A single man of 25, I really enjoyed my job working as a motor mechanic, playing tennis and football in my spare time and socialising at my local pub near Berowra, NSW. That was until earlier today when two men in a Subaru *Impreza* drove into the workshop. I noticed my boss, Glen, became very agitated when he sighted the 'customers.' He then took the really unusual step of inviting them into his office, which rang alarm bells in my head. He hardly ever did that. Voices became raised and about ten minutes later the men stormed off out into the street where I saw them hail a passing taxi, leaving the *Impreza* behind.

'What's that all about?' I asked myself as Glen emerged from his office, got in the car and drove it round the back of the workshop. Again, that was odd. Why did he do that? If vehicles were being left at the yard I always moved them to the storage area.

"Just mind the place for a while, Rod," Glen shouted to me, jumping in the work truck and slamming door, "Got a bit of business to do in town."

'That's another strange thing,' I thought. 'Where is he going in the middle of the morning? He rarely leaves the workshop.'

I finished servicing the car on the hoist and checked my watch. No sign of Glen. He'd been gone well over an hour. I wandered out to the front of the workshop and looked up and down the street. There was no one around. 'Good,' I thought, 'I'm going out the back to check that car.'

The green *Impreza* had no dints or scratches. In fact, it looked in pretty good condition. I peered inside. The keys were still in the ignition. 'That's another odd thing', I thought. My first instinct was to retrieve the keys and lock the vehicle. Then I paused. 'Not a good idea, Rod,' I said to myself. 'Glen will know you've been snooping around if you do that.'

I opened the front passenger door, sat inside, and looked around. Nothing untoward! Casually, I opened the glove compartment. "Bloody hell," I yelled. In front of me were three cellophane-clad packages tightly taped up containing a white substance! I groaned, threw the packages back in the glove compartment and raced back to the workshop. What on earth was Glen involved in?

A few minutes later the workshop phone rang. I answered hoping it might be Glen. No, it was a customer booking their car in for the next day. I checked my watch. Glen had now been away two hours. 'This is so unlike him,' I thought as I returned out the back to the *Impreza*. Should I lock it up? Yes, with those extremely suspicious contents inside that's the responsible thing to do. I can ask questions later. Oh my God! My eyes focused on the glove compartment – it was open and... empty!

I jumped out of the car a shocked look on my face. My heart was pounding. Where were those bloody packages? Next minute I heard footsteps behind me then a gunshot or was it a car

backfiring? At that moment I truly feared for my life! This certainly wasn't a normal working day at all. I swung round to face my boss, Glen, holding a gun! A look of sheer terror crossed my face.

"Woo-up, Man!" I yelled as I jumped away from the car. My mind went into overdrive; luckily I was outside the car by the time Glen snuck up behind me.

"Man, what's going on? A gun, really?" I yelled, looking at the scary weapon in his hand.

"I heard a noise out here and came out to see what was going on. Thought someone was stealing the car that you put out here. I noticed the keys were still in it. Luckily no-one stole it but I think someone must have been hanging around." I continued. "Glen, can you please put that thing away? What's this all about?" I enquired again, playing innocent.

"Sorry to scare you, Rod. I'm just a bit jumpy. I am minding this car for my friends, not sure what they are up to, but they made it hard for me to refuse so I decided it was time to buy a gun, that's where I've been today. With the world the way it is we never know when the workshop may be robbed or something." Glen moved toward me and put his hand on my shoulder, "You're a good worker, Rod, I am so sorry I reacted the way I did; won't happen again." He took the keys and locked the car up.

Boy, did I feel relieved. Whatever was going on I felt convinced didn't involve Glen. "Yeah. Let's just get back to work. Nice car that, a popular model that one..." I commented as we walked back into the workshop, my heart still pounding in my chest.

The weeks went by and the incident went out of my mind. Glen settled down, his gun was locked in a drawer but the *Impreza* still remained where we had left it. Luckily Glen's 'friends' hadn't been around again.

It was three months later. I was under a car doing an oil change when a commotion started out the front of the workshop.

I was glad I was under the car and out of sight. Maybe my presence would remain unnoticed...maybe.

"It's still there, hasn't moved, go check for yourselves you drongos, what's the big deal? You got the main prize didn't ya? Take the *Impreza* I don't want it. I've done my bit for The Boss. Paid him back in full I reckon." The edge in Glen's voice told me he wasn't as confident as he sounded.

"You ain't nearly paid him back yet, Buddy. He's not bought off that easy." A rough voice responded. "You here by yerself? Where's that dumb bloke works fer ya?"

Rod bristled.

"Out delivering a vehicle to Hornsby, won't be back for a while." Glen's reply made Rod breath a sigh of relief.

"Right. Then lock the shop and bring the *Impreza* out front. Follow us an' don't try any funny business."

“Where we going? What’s going on?” Glen was trying to sound butch, without a lot of success Rod thought ruefully. He liked his boss and was nervous something really bad was about to happen.

“We’re going on a little trip up the Hawkesbury, then we’ve got a rendezvous with a bunch of friendly seafarers, due in from their ocean voyage tonight, they’ve got a nice catch I believe,” the speaker chuckled.

Another voice joined in, “Yep, prize catch, an’ we need a bloke that owes The Boss a favour and a ‘clean’ car to pick it up...think I know just the bloke.”

His chuckle lacked humour and Rod felt as nervous for Glen as he was sure Glen was feeling...well, maybe not quite, he thought ruefully.

The door banged and he heard the bolts being locked. He waited a couple of minutes to make sure the crooks had left before climbing out from under the car. The first thing he did was check the drawer where he knew Glen kept the gun. It was still there. He wasn’t sure if that was a good thing or not. Glen needed protection but if the crooks found a gun on him, what would be their reaction? Rod wasn’t sure. He was trying to get his thoughts in order, without a lot of success.

Should I take the gun and follow them up to the Hawkesbury? They must be heading for Brooklyn if something’s coming from out at sea.

Should I ring the police or go by myself and catch them by surprise? The police might arrest Glen. He wouldn’t be too impressed with me then.

How dangerous is this?

What am I getting myself into?

Should I just go home and pretend I didn’t hear anything at all?

How am I going to get out? Those creeps locked the damn door.

That last thought was the least troubling of all Rod thought, chuckling to himself. “I think I must be going a bit bonkers, why am I laughing? If I can’t get out I can’t do anything. Now is that a comfort or a worry?” He chuckled again but there was no humour in the sound.

I wandered round the workshop for a few more minutes. I was in a predicament. “I won’t live with myself if I don’t help Glen. Maybe I should grab his gun. No, on second thoughts, I need to get out of here,” I said out loud as I looked for a way of escape. “That’s it, the window,” I shouted jubilantly looking upwards to the workshop roof. “...and it looks as if it is slightly ajar. Hooray!”

Taking a deep breath and with some effort I climbed onto the hoist and from there I opened the back passenger door of the car I had been servicing. I put my right leg on the framework of the car and with one mighty ‘heavo’ I shimmied up to the hoist cross bar. This took a few minutes of nervous manoeuvring but eventually there I was sitting high above the ground. I pulled myself up through the open window and slid down the sloping roof to the yard below.

'Whew, good job I'm fit,' I thought looking at a couple of surprised pigeons sitting on the fence near my car. They made a grunting sound in reply.

'Next stop Brooklyn Marina, I should be there in 40-50 minutes,' I thought. 'I'll locate Glen, the *Impreza*, the two geeks and, hopefully, the 'prize catch' whatever that is. Glen's been a good boss. I need to find why he's been forced to drive to this so-called rendezvous?'

Traffic wasn't too heavy and 45 minutes later I arrived at the Brooklyn Marina. As I drove into the car park an ambulance and two police cars, sirens blaring, followed me. I reduced my speed to let them pass. 'Interesting,' I thought. 'Wonder where they are off to?' 'Inquisitive' being my middle name, I followed.

Close to the water the ambulance was parked up and I could see the police cars had stopped further along the marina. Getting out of my car I, casually, sauntered along as close as I venture. "Bloody hell!" I exclaimed. Ahead of me I spotted the green *Imprezza*. It was surrounded by armed police. 'Where's Glen?' was my first thought. I crept closer then saw a police officer pull Glen from the car. Thank goodness, I thought. He was alive and was shaking his head as an armed policeman and another older man in a suit, maybe a detective, looked like they were questioning him.

Suddenly, out of the blue, I was aggressively shoved off the pathway by ...oh my goodness... one of the geeks I had witnessed threatening Glen earlier - the bald-headed one! He was closely followed by his more rotund companion. I stuck my foot out and he fell flat on his face! 'Bald-headed geek' turned, ignored his partner's predicament, drew a gun from his coat pocket and fired at me. I ducked. A second shot rang out! I threw myself fully on the ground. Shaking, I lay in a prone position for what seemed like hours, but was really probably only seconds! I was frozen with fear. When I gathered the courage to look up, two armed police officers were across the pathway, guns raised, preventing 'Bald-headed geek' from escaping.

Next minute police swarmed around me and my two assailants. I did not protest, I was just so thankful 'bald-head' and his mate were under police custody. We were led away to the Marina detective's office. I was shaking. Was it fear or relief? 'Bald-headed geek,' now handcuffed, was shouting expletives at any one who came near him while his partner was trying to extricate himself from the handcuffs, which had been promptly clamped on his wrists.

I was told to sit down.

A few seconds later Glen was escorted into the detective's office.

"Hi Glen," I murmured.

He looked up, shaking his head.

I rose to join him but was stopped by a young police officer.

"Hey, Mate," I called out, "he's my boss. I want to make sure he is okay."

"Sorry, Sir, he is under arrest. You will probably be allowed to speak with him later at the police station where we will be taking you all for questioning."

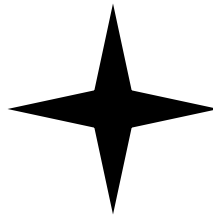
I shrugged my shoulders. “Okay.” I smiled at Glen who acknowledged me with a nod of his head.

Two months on, the events at Brooklyn Marina still cause me a few sleepless nights but I am glad to say Glen, who is also still traumatised by ‘Bald-headed geek and his mate’s actions,’ is still running his business.

Glen’s brother Roger, it was revealed, was a member of the NSW Drug Squad. After the drama at Brooklyn Marina, Glen told me Roger had enlisted his help to arrest ‘Bald-headed geek, real name, Alfie, his partner, Graham and ‘The Boss’. The Drug Squad had been on the tail of the ‘The Boss’ and his crew for quite a while. An undercover operative had learnt the ‘The Boss’ MO was to implicate unsuspecting automobile workshop owners by dropping a vehicle off for a service leaving packages of drugs, brought into NSW via Brooklyn Marina, in the vehicles. Dealers would then collect these vehicles from workshops and distribute the drugs throughout NSW. This very lucrative scheme was going well until, of course, ‘Bald-headed’ geek Alfie and Graham left the *Impreza* at Glen’s workshop.

The packages I spotted in the car, which later disappeared, were all part of a trap set by the Drug Squad with Glen’s help which, ultimately, led to Alfie, Graham and ‘The Boss’ being captured. Glen also told me ‘The Boss’ was a slow payer, Alfie and Graham, not receiving their cut of the profits for nearly for three months! They were extremely angry and more than happy to ‘spill the beans’ about the vast, lucrative scheme they had been involved in - their reward - witness protection!

I still hear Roger’s words echoing in my ears when, at the case’s successful closure, he said, *Thanks guys, it’s all in a day’s work for us.* For me, it’s a day I’ll never forget!



Keith Ludden is a native of Nebraska and lived in Maine for twenty years. Ludden worked as a journalist for Nebraska Public Radio, and as an arts administrator for the Maine Arts Commission. His story, *The Tide Comes In, the Tide Goes Out* was published in *DoubleSpeak*, an online magazine. He has also been published in *Little Fish Magazine*, *The Writer’s Journal*, *PentaCat*, *Paradox*, *Mocking Owl Roost*, and *Ariel Chart*. His first collection of short stories, *“It Makes the Bread Rise,”* was published in March, 2026

Coming to You Live? By Keith Luddon ©

The old Philco radio stood about three and a half feet tall. Its cabinet had curved sides made of a dark wood, burnished to a warm glow. The dial looked like a ruler marked with numbers and decimals representing frequencies for both the AM and FM bands. On one side of the receiver, a knob connected to a variable capacitor could be spun as one searched for a station, and in the back, vacuum tubes emitted a soft amber glow, warming the air for the romantic music that was playing. Glenn Miller's *Moonlight Serenade* filled the room.

Henry was tall and lanky, with close-cropped hair. Even though his aquiline nose was a little larger than it should be and came to a sharp point, he was still quite handsome. As a boy, he was known to tinker with old radios, fascinated by the glowing tubes passing electrons from cathode to anode through a vacuum; a little world enclosed in a glass tube. He would stay up at night trying to see how many different stations he could find on the radio.

After rescuing the radio from his parents' basement, he cleaned it up, gave it a good polish, and set it just below the *Ghostbusters* movie poster on the wall in his living room, thinking it would be a good conversation piece. Staring at the radio, he had no idea what station the music was coming from. He knew of none nearby that broadcast that format.

The music was a little staticky, so Henry gently rocked the tuning knob to the left and right to find the station's sweet spot. There! It was perfectly clear. He listened for a time, and the music played on. There were no commercials, no station breaks, just the enchanting music. Finally, a woman's voice was heard over the music, as lovely and as bewitching as the music.

"Henry, are you listening?" she said. "If so, I'll keep playing the music. You'll keep listening, won't you?"

Henry stepped back for a moment, startled. Thinking someone was playing a trick on him, he stepped behind the radio to see if someone was hiding there, but there was no one. He moved back to the front of the radio and fiddled with the tuning knob again. Static, then more music. The woman's voice spoke again.

"Henry, are you there?"

"I...I'm here," he stammered.

"Good. I've been waiting."

The music continued; Artie Shaw, Duke Ellington, Benny Goodman. She would lower the volume on the music somewhat, and they began to carry on a conversation. He felt a little silly talking to the radio, but the voice coming from the radio was mesmerizing, and he wanted to keep her talking. He learned that she had been an Army nurse in World War II. She learned that he came home from Vietnam ten years ago, with one less arm. She would play Artie Shaw, then he would request something from The Eagles—his kind of music from the '70s. Still, the 1940s swing music grew on him. He couldn't resist tapping his toe. When the clock struck twelve, she said, "I've got to go now. I sign off at midnight."

The next evening, at sundown, Henry turned the radio on again. He wanted to know more. Why was this woman speaking to him from the radio? Where did she come from? He could hear southern cadences in her speech, so he asked her, "Where are you from?"

"Paducah, Kentucky," she said. "Wanna hear a nice waltz?" *Tennessee Waltz* began to fill the room.

"Why are you in the radio?" he asked. "How did you get there?" he asked.

"It's just where I ended up. After the war, I'd seen so many mangled bodies and so much blood that I didn't want to be a nurse anymore. My husband didn't come home; he was killed on Omaha Beach, so I went to live with my sister in Philadelphia and got a job in a radio factory. I thought it would be less stressful, but the truth was, the work was repetitive and rather tedious, fitting the tubes into the radios, one after another, over and over. After the excitement of the war, I got bored and I felt guilty for leaving nursing. At the beginning of the war, I joined the Army Nurse Corps because I wanted to help and I wanted to do my part. I wasn't really helping anyone working in that factory. I was so bored one day, when everyone was on lunch break, I picked up one of the vacuum tubes and blew my spirit into it. All the soldiers were returning from the war, so nobody at the factory missed me. No one saw me disappear. They figured I just walked out and never returned. What about you?"

"When I got back from Vietnam with just one arm, I felt sorry for myself. For months, I just sat in my room, and I was rather difficult to live with," Henry told her. "I drank for a while, and my wife, Mary, left me, but I'm okay now. I got myself sorted out. . . Mostly. . . It's good to have someone to talk to. It would be nice if I could see you."

"It would be nice if I could see you too. I'm sorry about your arm."

Tennessee Waltz continued to play, and next to the radio, a soft light began to glow. It gradually took the shape of a beautiful woman in an Army nurse's uniform. The insignia on her uniform told him she was a second lieutenant, so he smiled and saluted. She was somewhat shorter than he was, with dark eyes; her voluminous shoulder-length hair styled in a "Victory Roll."

"Tell me about Mary," she said.

"We met in high school. One weekend, we went to a dance together. I didn't really know how to dance, and instead of laughing at me and finding another partner, she taught me. She had the most wonderful smile. When I came home from 'Nam, I watched that smile slowly disappear as my drinking got worse."

"I saw a lot of soldiers come home and disappear into the bottle," she said. "War destroys a lot of families—one way or another."

All evening, they danced, with Henry's one good arm around her waist and her hand on his shoulder.

"Mary taught you well," she said.

At midnight, the light surrounding the beautiful woman faded, as did the woman herself, and Henry switched off the radio. In the morning, when the sun came up, he walked over to the window, greeted the sun, and smiled for the first time in months.

Henry looked forward to sundown each evening. That's when the radio waves would bounce off the ionosphere, carrying farther, and the voice would return. He didn't even know her name. After a week, he worked up the courage to ask her.

"It's Rebecca."

"How did you know *my* name?"

"Don't you know?"

"No. I've never seen you before. You've never seen *me* before."

"Oh, but I *have*. Your parents bought this radio, with me in it, in 1950. I sat in their living room while you were growing up, watching you."

The second week, Henry cooked dinner one evening.

"Are you hungry?"

"No. I don't get hungry anymore," she chuckled.

"Oh. I'm sorry. You seem so real. I forget sometimes. I'll put this food away later."

"Let's have some music." They danced to Duke Ellington, then The Eagles, and kept dancing. When he looked up at the clock on the wall, he was surprised at how much time had gone by.

"Time to sign off," she said. Her image faded, and a great sadness settled on Henry. If he had only been born a generation earlier, maybe he could have made a life with her, both of them as complete human beings. The next two nights, he didn't turn the radio on. He just sat in front of it, thinking about Rebecca. " *I'm hopeless,*" he thought. " *Maybe she isn't real. Maybe I'm just imagining her.*"

Still, she was all he could think about. The next evening at sundown, he couldn't help himself. It was as if he was passing a bar on the street, craving a drink. He needed to hear her voice, so he turned the radio on.

"Henry, are you there?"

"Yes, but are *you* there?"

"Of course I am."

With that, Rebecca appeared beside the radio. Neither spoke for a few moments. It was Rebecca who broke the silence.

"Where have you been?"

"I was scared. I didn't want to turn the radio on."

"Why not? We've been having such a lovely time."

"I was scared you weren't real; that I was just imagining you."

"Is anybody real? Is the world real? I used to wonder about that, too."

"What did you want in your life?" he asked.

"Oh, mostly what anybody wants—a home, a family, something useful to do. What did you want?"

"Mostly the same things—and a little respect. I just wanted to accomplish something."

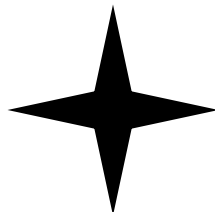
She smiled and held out her hand. "C'mon. Let's dance some more."

He held her tightly, afraid she might escape. They danced for hours until he whispered, "You're not real, are you?"

"I have to go," she said. Then she faded into the shadows.

For a long time, Henry sat in the overstuffed chair staring at the radio, feeling like a fool. Finally, his anger overwhelmed him, and he exploded. "YOU'RE NOT REAL!" he shouted at the radio. He began to wish he'd kept one of the bottles he poured down the sink months ago. In a fit of rage, he grabbed the radio and overturned it, slamming it to the floor. As the empty static came out of the radio, he kicked it, and it fell silent.

With the radio lying face down on the floor, he could see the vacuum tubes that earlier glowed amber with warmth, now dark. Horrified at what he had done, he knelt down and began pulling the tubes out of the radio one by one and examining them, trying to determine which one held Rebecca's spirit—until he came to the last one. That one was cracked and broken, its filaments in pieces at its base. That one, he knew, was the one.



Ian Bishop lives in Sheffield, UK. He used to work for Social Services but retired years ago. It's a good idea, you can start to become the person you ought to be. He spends his time doing what he wants to, and when he's had enough, he stops. Imagine that. Mostly he does art work, and pencil drawings that he develops digitally, and writing of course.

Surplus by Ian Bishop ©

Mum voted Tory all her life. She thought the posh boys knew how to go on. She said they were born to it and had our best interests at heart. In any case, she'd be damned if she'd be told what to do by a lot of Labour riff-raff no better than herself.

This didn't fit with my thinking but there was no point arguing. Mum came from an ordinary working family living in a tall terraced house on a narrow, cobbled street in Nottingham. It was a bit gloomy, the light seemed to struggle to get in somehow. I remember it from when we went to Grandma's on Saturday afternoons. Everyone would be there, it was a weekly get-together. I'd get a lot of fuss and sweets and stuff, so that was alright.

I think there was more to Mum's politics than snobbishness and naivety. She was quite a sensitive woman really and not stupid. She'd started work at Player's, the cigarette factory. I say factory, there were five of them. Player's was massive, thousands of workers at its peak. They say they used to sign a check for a million pounds a day in tax.

I wonder what it was like for her in those early days. Her first job was as a leaf stripper. I'll bet it was a bit rough, no doubt made worse by the attitudes of the day and all the arse slapping crudity that went with it. "What's up, duck? Can't yer tek a joke?" I thought perhaps Mum's politics was some kind of rejection of all that, aspiring to what she saw as refined, dignified and proper.

Dad worked at Player's too, it's where they met. We all worked there at one time or another, me, and Grandma and Grandad. It was a good place to work, pay not too bad, a free ciggy allowance, sports club. I don't think there were many job adverts, you just had to be 'asked for'. Dad asked for me.

Really, if you could push a brush or pull a trolley, you were in. You just don't get that scale of unskilled work anymore. I sometimes wonder if that's not part of why you see so many homeless people around now; they're surplus. When 'Al' gets going properly, those who own all the stuff, those with all the power, they'll need even less of us then. More surplus.

When I started they put me in what they called the Pool. From there you could get sent anywhere there was a need. The foreman was a tall bloke, ramrod straight, ex-army, never spoke, always shouted. 'Now then, John! I want you to go down to Packing in Number Three. All right? Just ask for the foreman.' I still stood there. 'What you waiting for John?' You see, what was worrying me was that my name isn't John, it's Paul. Perhaps there'd be a mix up and then they'd be cross that I'd never said anything. 'Er. My names not John though.' Big explosion. 'I don't care what your fucking name is, John!' 'Get down the fucking Packing or I'll...'. Rushing out I glimpsed a line of grinning faces against the wall. They must have watched this loads of times.

This first job was as a bartlet boy. A bartlet was a tall trolley with racks from which hung loads of 'u' shaped trays. These trays were full of loose cigarettes, all lined up the same way. It was a bit precarious so you had to go careful. The bartlets came up on a lift from the making floor. I'd push them out from the lift to the packing machines to keep them supplied.

An endless, frantic scream came from these machines and there were about a dozen altogether, all going full tilt. The noise hit you like a thump in the guts when you pushed through the doors. It was so loud that it scared me the first time and I had to stop myself from turning back. You couldn't ever understand unless you heard it for yourself. There was the smell too, a mixture of hot machine oil and tobacco, sweet and sickly. Some people couldn't cope with it, especially the tobacco smell, it got on their stomachs and they had to leave.

They were a miracle though, those big machines. Cardboard would go flying into them along with cellophane, silver paper, tear strip, and the ciggies of course. Rushing out the end came a stream of perfect flip-top packs of twenty, all neat as ninepence. It was a joy to see.

It took four girls to work each machine, all perched at different places. One would take a tray of loose cigarettes from the bartlet and then swing it in a fast arc in front of her so that it banged upside down onto a smooth steel plate. The cigarettes, still perfectly aligned, would slide down into the guts of the machine. It took some doing but I never saw them spill any. The girls were on piece work, they got paid for how much they did, so me keeping up the ciggy supply was a big deal.

Mum had gone up in the world by this time, she was in the offices at Voucher Exchange. You see, some brands of cigarettes had vouchers in the packs. If you saved them up, you could send them off and get something from a gift catalogue. Brilliant eh? The offices were somewhere else so I never saw Mum much. I never saw Dad much either because he was in Number One.

I liked this job. I liked keeping my bartlets in a tidy row near the lift, those waiting to go out and empty ones ready to go back down. They didn't want them piling up round the machines. They said it wasn't safe. Most of all I liked the gossip and banter yelled across the machines by the girls. They'd bring me in sometimes. I didn't much banter back though, they were a bit older than me for one thing. In any case, I wasn't very good at it, so mostly I'd just grin and laugh along. It was alright though, it felt like I belonged.

There'd always be excitement if one of the girls got engaged. It was a big thing then, an engagement. No one's bothered nowadays. She'd go round showing off her ring and all the others would make a fuss, making out it was the best ring they'd ever seen. At dinner they'd all go out for a drink to celebrate.

I'd sometimes go and see Dad over at Number One for dinner. You could get a big plateful in the canteen for a couple of bob, all subsidised by the firm. We didn't talk that much. Dad was a quiet bloke. He kept his thoughts to himself. I'm like my Dad, I don't want to be, but I am. Mum was different, she never minded slapping your face with some mad opinion or other. 'It's all a load of rubbish, you know Paul, this business of cigarettes and cancer.' What it was, she liked to provoke, she liked to argue.

The only problem with the bartlet job was when for some reason things slowed down on the making floor. It was the piece work, the girls stood to lose. We'd be waiting ages for the lift and some of the machines would have had to stop. Finally, when the lift did come, there might only be one bartlet in it. I'd haul it out and they'd all be looking at me, all shouting it was their turn. You couldn't do right for wrong. I'd just give it to the nearest stopped machine and scoot

back to the lift. There'd be a lot of shouting and swearing. I hated that. I liked them and I wanted them to like me.

But all this was years ago. I work in a different town altogether now and Mum and Dad are safely retired. The last time I went over to see them, I saw in the local paper that they were scheduled to pull poor old Number Three down, starting on that Saturday. I thought I'd go for a look-see.

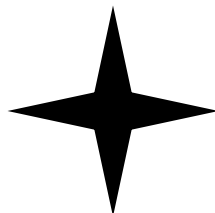
When I got there, there was quite a crowd of blokes hanging around, couldn't see any women though. I looked up at the line of windows on the top floor where the canteen was. At break time I'd stand up there looking over the town and enjoying a sly one filched from one of the bartlets. You could get stopped for that, but no one would see if you were careful.

I remembered something else. After the bartlet job, I'd worked on the docks for a while, loading up the lorries with big boxes of cigs. Next to the docks was an office that wasn't used anymore. On one wall were framed photographs of servicemen with a notice that read 'Our Friends Who Never Came Home.' I wondered if anyone had shifted them. The building had already been closed for nearly a year and somehow I just knew they'd still be there, forgotten behind the dusty glass of the office.

There was a crane lumbering up, a traditional sort of crane with a cab, caterpillar tracks and a big arm made of criss-cross steel. It was a big swine though. At the end of the arm was a chain and at the end of that was an iron wrecking ball. We all watched as it sidled up to the silent wall of Number Three. The guy started moving the crane arm, just a little, side to side, but each time the easy swing of the mighty ball grew. Then suddenly the crane turned. Instead of the ball swinging in front of the wall, it crashed into it. Nothing, it just bounced off. The crane tried again, and then again, but it just kept bouncing off. Blimey, they knew how to build in those days. Number Three looked like it was never going to give up. All the blokes were laughing and jeering and shouting stuff. 'Get the bastard down!' Then one time it didn't bounce off and there was a big crack right down the brickwork. Dead silence. We knew it was all up now. A couple of blokes were crying. You couldn't hide it in the stillness before the next mighty swing and crash.

I think they still make some Players cigs, abroad where wages are cheaper. A lot of big Nottingham firms have gone the same, Gerards Soap; they've moved to Thailand and the Raleigh and Boots factories, they've all gone. Nottingham is a poor town now. It's the posh boys again, the ones with their hands on the big levers, much bigger than the lever for the wrecking ball. Same effect though. They're still creaming it in but their stash is squirrelled away all around the world where it can't be got at. Still, as Mum said, they have our best interests at heart. Poor old Mum.

A lot of us are going to be surplus soon. We'll be told to adapt, look for new opportunities. Maybe we can join a new servant class and be grateful. Maybe we can grub for roots. Who can tell? But no one is nothing though, surplus or not.



S. Bee is a fifty- something and happily married. She lives in a small town in West Yorkshire. She suffers from anxiety and depression, so writing short stories helps her as a distraction activity. It's a kind of occupational therapy.

A New Chapter by S Bee ©

Clutching my book, I nervously rang the doorbell.

Sylvia was blonde, slender, middle- aged and rather glamorous. She opened the door and smiled warmly.

“Hi Kerry. It's good to see you again. Come in and follow me!”

Trotting away down the hall in high heels, she led me to her spacious, tastefully decorated living room , all done out in pretty pastels.

Recently retired, I'd re- located to the rural village of Little Harton.

My sister Shona had moved here five years ago. She'd settled in nicely- she really loved it. In fact, she'd set up her own succesful community project – a lunch club for senior citizens. It was a very popular project.

I was keen to get involved in village activities too, so I joined a local book group.

However, instead of the group meeting in a central location, such as the library or a cafe, it was hosted in people's homes on weekday afternoons.

I was the newbie host when the small group of four visited me last week.

The book group included Sylvia, down to earth, sensible Maggie. There was a lively married couple, Barry and Helen, plus me.

We were all around the same age, mid- sixties.

When I'd hosted, I'd provided mugs of tea, plus plenty of biscuits, and we'd had a smashing afternoon, nattering away about a freshly released edgy thriller.

This week, we'd gathered at Sylvia's home to discuss a gritty crime story set in the Victorian era.

While Sylvia made tea in the kitchen, we found seats.

“Sylvia usually brings out the tea service,” Maggie muttered.

I frowned. “The tea service?”

Helen nodded and Barry was just about to speak when Sylvia came in, carrying a huge, loaded tray.

It contained a posh china 1930's tea service. This included a floral teapot, tiny delicate cups, teaspoons, sugar bowls and a cute little milk jug.

Home- made biscuits were arranged on small plates, and neat, fabric napkins were dutifully handed out, too.

I was taken aback. Then a twinge of guilt picked. Oh...maybe I should have tried harder at my place?

Our next meeting was at Maggie's. The fiction this time was a witty modern rom- com.

However, Maggie went a stage further than Sylvia.

Along with the tea, she served freshly baked goodies - an assortment of muffins, flapjacks and sweet butterfly buns.

"Oh, this is smashing." Barry rubbed his hands in appreciation.

But I was daunted. "Is this the kind of thing you'd usually do, Maggie?"

She shook her head. "No. But it doesn't harm to step up a gear, does it?"

Sylvia looked put out, and I admit that my emotions were mixed. I felt out of sorts.

With the witty rom- com forgotten, people happily helped themselves.

I reflected...I'd seen the refreshment side as basically wetting our whistles when discussing the novels.

When it was my turn to host again, would I be expected to whip up an extensive delicious array of home- baked treats? I was certainly no baker... but I was willing to learn.

Well, at our third meeting, Barry and Helen really went to town!

They'd laid on a large buffet spread, with plenty of home- made treats, such as quiche, small pies and delightful sweet tarts.

Alcohol- free wine and beer were thrown in, plus a variety of soft drinks.

I gulped. This was like some sort of 'Come dine with me' competition!

"Crikey. I wasn't expecting a full buffet!" I exclaimed.

"When Maggie provided cakes and flapjacks, we thought we can do better than that!" Helen breezed.

Right. So it *was* a competition!

I smiled. "Well, it's very kind of you both."

"This puts my little tea party effort to shame." Sylvia greedily eyed the crisp bowl, while Maggie quickly grabbed a sausage roll.

"Come on everyone. Get stuck in!" Barry grinned, as Helen handed out the plates.

Call me awkward but I just couldn't. I didn't feel comfortable, taking advantage, so I nibbled a few mini celery sticks, sipped a glass of cola, and left it at that.

The whole competition catering hosting element had taken me by surprise. I had a feeling that next week's novel (A family story, set in WW2) would be pushed aside yet again.

Later, I popped round to Shona's and outlined the problem.

"Hmm... clearly, they're not bothered about discussing books. I have the impression that they're more interested in the baking side. Could they put their baking skills to good use? I need everyday volunteers for the lunch club but I'm also looking for willing people to help with a regular event," she explained.

"Oh, I didn't realise. Well, look, I'd be happy to be an everyday volunteer," I said.

She smiled. "That's great! Turn up tomorrow at the community centre at 10.30 and I'll show you the ropes."

I enjoyed helping Shona with the lunches. It provided me with a sense of purpose, it got me out the house and I liked being with new people.

After my shift, when the clients had gone home, we chatted about her plans for a monthly events. I mulled over her words.

As it was my turn to host again, I invited the book group to meet me at a nice, local gastro pub.

"I can't bake for toffee, but I wouldn't mind lessons," I said.

"I'd be happy to help you, Kerry," Sylvia offered.

My heart warmed. "That'd be lovely."

"Don't bother bringing the wartime saga," I said to them over the phone. "Just turn up."

"This sounds very mysterious," Maggie had murmured.

When we met, I ushered them into the pub and we found a table.

"Feel free to order what you like. I'll cover the bill," I said.

Helen smiled, as she picked up a menu. "This is very good of you, Kerry. But why is there no book for us this week?"

I took a deep breath. "Look, I have a proposal for you all."

Sylvia looked interested. "A proposal? Go on."

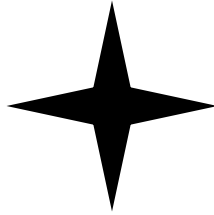
"My sister Shona runs a lunch club for senior citizens and she needs catering volunteers. I wondered whether you'd all consider joining me? We need a willing team to help organise monthly tea party dances. We'll need lots of home-made biscuits, buns and cakes."

Maggie's eyes lit up. "Oh, that sounds right up my street!"

"Count us in, Kerry," Barry and Helen chimed.

“Me too,” Sylvia added.

I beamed. With baking lessons for me too, it was a brand new chapter for us all!



J A Newman has published five books: *No One Comes Close* a memoir, *Bay of Secrets* a family mystery and two rom-coms: *Where There's a Will* and the sequel *Losing the Will*. Her latest work is her anthology *The Other Side of Life*. She has written many articles for *This England* and *Evergreen* magazines and *The Writers and Readers'* magazine. She has also had historical short stories published in two anthologies for the Caradon Hill Heritage Project and one for the charity *Help4Heroes*. She was born and raised in Bexley, Kent and enjoyed a hairdressing career in various locations before retiring to South East Cornwall where she found her writing voice. She is currently living in West Norfolk with her husband.

Closure by J A Newman ©

I felt someone knock my elbow and the book I was reading fell to the floor with a slap.

‘I’m so sorry, I’ve lost your place,’ he said, briefly scanning the book and handing it back to me.

I shook my head. ‘It’s fine, really.’

‘Let me buy you a cup of coffee, it’s the least I can do.’

‘No, honestly, it doesn’t matter.’

‘I think it does.’ He looked at me keenly. ‘I’m Robin.’

His hand felt warm, reassuring. ‘Beth,’ I answered. I replaced the book on the shelf and started to move towards the instant hot drinks machine where readers were encouraged to leave a donation.

Robin smiled, ‘I think this calls for some *real* coffee.’

I don’t know what made me do it. I could’ve said, No, I’m sorry, I must be getting back, but like a child in the *Pied Piper of Hamelin* I followed him, out of the library and down towards the quayside bathed in sunshine and buzzing with holiday-makers; some guarding their fish and chips from the scavenging sea gulls, others crabbing with their children.

I watched Robin, walking slightly in front of me, self-assured, happy in his own skin. He suddenly stopped to lean on a railing to watch a man mooring his boat. He turned to me. ‘A pretty everyday occurrence, you might think. But you never know – there could be something you

hadn't noticed before, something out of the ordinary. Too many people walk around with their eyes shut.'

We watched the man for a while then Robin turned to walk on. I was still unsure. I hung back, wondering if he would miss me if I slunk into a shop doorway, but he kept looking round to check I was still there. The crowds of holiday-makers began to thin out at the museum where we turned left and climbed up the hill. Just before the top we came to a little coffee shop I hadn't known existed. There was no sign above the door, nothing to indicate what it was, but I must've walked past it a hundred times.

'Cappuccino?' asked Robin, closing the heavy door behind us.

'Yes, lovely. Thank you.'

We had the place to ourselves save for the woman working behind the counter. I self-consciously sat in the one and only alcove, Robin opposite, the sun struggling to get through the grimy window that shrouded us from passers-by. As I looked around I noticed the café was small and cosy with only a further coffee table and a sofa. It could've been someone's front room.

Two frothy coffees were delivered wordlessly to our table. Almost immediately our conversation focused on the social issues facing our country. I discovered we shared the same sentiments – a refreshing change, as my husband Jack refused to be drawn into any political discussion. Coming from a long line of fishermen, he preferred to keep his head down and mind his own business and he advised me to do the same. Robin was different; a published author, he was writing a book on some important political events in the last century. He was passionate about it.

'How is it you've never given a talk at the library?' I ventured.

'I don't speak in public... it tends to get you in trouble. I have some very strong views.'

I instinctively lowered my voice. 'But that's good, surely?'

He shot me a look. 'Yes, but the days of free speech are numbered.' He took a mouthful of coffee to wash away the words. 'But enough of that. Tell me about yourself.'

I fidgeted with my teaspoon as I began to tell Robin about my ambition to be taken seriously as a writer, something Jack dismissed as a mere whim. He believed a woman should look after her family and not fill her head with silly notions. To my shame I had always given way to keep the peace.

'You should believe in yourself,' said Robin, fixing my attention with his denim blue eyes. 'I'd like to see some of your work.'

But then I ruined it all by babbling on about my home life. I suddenly felt ashamed, disloyal. 'I'm sorry, I don't know why I'm telling you all this.'

'Don't apologise,' said Robin, 'sounds to me like you've buried it for too long. Ever thought of writing it?'

'Huh, I wouldn't know where to start.'

Robin's eyebrows shot up. 'That's one of the dilemmas facing us all.'

I was gratified that he thought of me as an equal. I forgot all about the time until I sneaked a glance at my watch. I got up to leave. 'I'm sorry, but I must be getting back. Erica will be home from school soon and she'll wonder where I am.'

'Of course, that's my trouble; I never know when to shut up!'

I was torn; one half of me wanted to leave, the other to stay and continue our stimulating conversation.

'Maybe we can do this again sometime?' said Robin.

'Yes, I'd like that very much.'

'Now you know where to find me...'

I nodded and reluctantly left him sitting there.

As I hurried back past the museum, the light now changed and the shadows lengthened, I wondered what he'd be doing in the next few hours. Would he be going back to an empty house, cooking his own dinner? He hadn't mentioned a partner or any family.

I came to the railings where Robin had stopped and I knew, even if I never saw him again, I would never be able to walk past them without thinking of him.

A few days later I visited the library again but the book I wanted wasn't there. I found myself retracing my steps back to the little coffee shop. I hung about outside, debating whether or not to go in, when a woman brushed past me and opened the door so I slunk in behind her. I immediately spotted Robin sitting at one of the tables with two other people. He looked up at me and smiled.

'Hey, Beth! Come and join us.'

And that was the start of our clandestine meetings. As the weeks passed I learned that Robin was single and something of an enigma. I was drawn to him. He encouraged me to write, made me feel whole, valued. I managed to keep all of this from Jack, going about my daily tasks as if nothing had changed, until one day he saw a piece of writing I had carelessly left on the kitchen counter. He questioned me so I told him everything.

The inevitable divorce followed. Jack was very upset at first but then he realised it was the best thing for both of us; as long as he could keep the family home and see Erica whenever he wanted. This was fine by me. Erica loved her father and I didn't want to make any demands. All I wanted was to live with Robin, for Erica to accept him and understand what he meant to me. Robin could never replace her father of course but, over time, she came to respect him. He in turn nurtured her inquiring mind, took a keen interest in her school work and later encouraged her to study history at university.

But by the time Erica graduated our country was in turmoil. The government was overthrown and the newly-formed Integrity Party took control. Robin had always maintained they were not in a strong enough position to form a government but, unbeknown to us, there had been a powerful underground movement supporting their cause. Strict laws were put in place from the outset and our lives were never to be the same again.

Robin's predictions came true – we struggled hopelessly to maintain our freedom. We were now living in a police state with armed law-enforcement officers patrolling every street. All public areas were closely guarded with surveillance cameras. There was very little opportunity for political discussion; the coffee shop was discovered and closed down and some of our friends were imprisoned.

Then one stormy evening, just before curfew, Robin became involved in an argument in the town square. A riot ensued. Erica had been running back from Jack's when she caught sight of Robin among the frantic protestors.

She burst in through our front door. 'Quick, Mum! They've got Robin!'

Panic-stricken we rushed to the scene, the rain drenching us. Crowds of people had gathered to witness the injustice inflicted on the men and women, their pitiful cries ignored. Some were being dragged into the waiting vehicles. Erica and I held hands as we searched for Robin while loudspeakers and searchlights split the darkness.

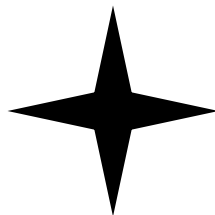
Then I saw him, restrained by two officers, the rain washing the blood from his hair, his eyes.

'Beth!'

I ran to him, pushing through the wall of riot shields with little thought for my own safety. I grabbed Robin's outstretched hand slippery with blood, but they were already dragging him away, pulling us apart. Hot tears clouded my vision. I held onto his hand as long as possible but I was finally beaten back and fell headlong on the cobbles. Erica forced her way through the confusion to pick me up before I was trampled underfoot. We clung to each other, shivering in the downpour and engulfed in sobs, while they frog-marched Robin into the green armoured vehicle.

That was the last I saw of my beloved Robin. I still maintain he disappeared under suspicious circumstances like hundreds of others, but there is little I can do about it under this present regime.

Today I will meet Erica at the library before it finally closes for good. I would have liked to talk about my work and to pay homage to the remarkable man who inspired me, but that's out of the question. I must also try and rummage through the containers full of books awaiting their fate and retrieve the one I was reading when I met him: George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty Four*.



Andy Stewart is a retired family doctor. He and his wife have a small vineyard in Cornwall. He enjoys writing stories with a twist. He has had numerous short stories published including *Blue Vinny* in Scribble Magazine, *Nipples, Coils and Compost* in Henshaw Press Six Anthology, *Marty* in Write Time 2 Anthology, *It isn't the Cough that Carries You Off* in Gin City 2 Anthology, *Aurora* in All Your Stories Magazine, *The Receipts* in Flash Flood Journal, *No Sweat* in The Farnham Flash Festival Competition Winners Book and *Raindrops Keep Falling* in the Tothill Tales and Tittle Tattle Anthology.

Pest Control by Andy Stewart ©

It was Bingo Blitz Night in the back bar of The Hooting Owl. There were twelve round tables with seating for four people at each. We three friends were sipping our spritzers, our rapid delivery chit-chat temporarily halted by the act of swallowing.

"Is this seat free?"

We glanced up and saw a woman with her hair in a bun, a few straggly greying hairs escaping. She smiled with her eyes as much as with her mouth.

"It is. Do join us," said Evie.

"You three are looking very glamorous. I feel a bit dowdy sitting with you."

"You don't look at all dowdy! I love that fluffy jumper you're wearing. We always doll-up for Thursdays," I explained. "It's when we leave partners, kids and jobs behind and let our hair down. Back to our teens. Even though we're all in our forties. I'm Nicky by the way, this is Evie, and that is Alison."

"I'm Kath," said the late arrival as she sat down. She pointed an index finger at the three of us in turn. "Nicky, Evie and Alison. I'm terrible at remembering names, but I'll do my best. And, sadly, it's a couple of decades since I was in my forties. I've never been to Bingo before, so I'll rely on you three to show me the ropes."

"Don't worry, Kath. It's not complicated and Mick the bingo caller always explains the rules before we start, which will be in about five minutes time. We've not seen you around here before."

"I moved in a month ago. Semi on Northgate Street. This is my nearest pub. I was at a loose end, so I thought I'd give it a try. Where do you get those Bingo cards?"

"Up at the bar. You put a pound in that yellow bucket and one of the bar staff will give you a strip of tickets and a pencil."

Kath made her way to the bar.

"She must live alone," whispered Evie. "She said 'I' moved in rather than 'we'. I noticed a wedding ring. Might be divorced or widowed."

"Alright, Miss Marple," I said. "I'm sure Kath will tell us in her own good time. Although if I divorced Shaun, I'd ditch the ring before he was out of the door."

Kath returned just as Mick appeared beside the bar. He was wearing a brightly coloured striped blazer, a purple T-shirt with 'Life Sucks' emblazoned on it, a pair of scarlet knee length cargo shorts and yellow trainers.

"That outfit might have worked better if he was ten years younger and less podgy," Alison observed.

"Shush," hissed Evie. "He might hear you."

"Perhaps he's colour blind," I said.

The assembled punters went quiet, every seat in the room now taken.

"Good evening, laydeeeze and gentlemen and welcome to The Owl's Thursday night bingo bash. I see we have a few newcomers so at the risk of boring the pants off those of you that are wearing any, I'll quickly explain what happens."

"He says that every week, Kath."

"I thought he might, Evie."

Mick launched into his preamble. "The computer randomly selected number will be displayed on the screen behind me, and I'll call it out as it appears. First player to tick all the numbers on any one of their cards calls out 'Bingo'. You win the contents of the bucket minus ten percent which the pub keeps for donating towards my ill-gotten gains. Everybody ready? Then eyes down!"

The first number was illuminated on the screen.

"In a state, twenty-eight" intoned Mick as pencils went into action.

"One little duck, number two."

This continued for a while until Kath nudged Alison. "I think I've got a full house."

"You have. Shout out quick."

"Bingo!"

"What's the code on the bottom corner of your winning ticket, my lovely?" asked Mick.

"Umm...Alpha one three four nine."

The bingo caller pressed some buttons on his hand-held controller. "The computer says YES! It's matched your ticket with the numbers selected. What's your name?"

"Kath."

There was a round of applause.

"Congratulations, Kath. I'll put your winnings in an envelope to collect from the bar. We'll play another round of Blitz Bingo in twenty minutes. Gives you all time to order more drinks and put another pound in that bucket."

"Beginners luck," said Kath.

"You're obviously a natural," I said. "And I reckon with every table full and each person paying a quid you'll be getting a nice little payout. It will be about forty pounds. Not a bad return for a quid."

"Nicky's good at maths. She's a teacher," said Alison.

"What subject?"

"Biology," I explained.

"In other words, the birds and the bees, at which she excels," laughed Evie.

"I'd better get a round in. What are you drinking?"

"That's very kind of you, Kath. We're all on white wine spritzers."

Kath tucked herself onto the end of the queue vying for the bar staff's attention, a team consisting of Mick and two young women wearing Hooting Owl T-shirts. By the time she pushed her way back to our table balancing three spritzers and a gin and tonic on a tiny tray, simultaneously gripping a brown envelope between her teeth, we three had drained our glasses. She put the envelope into her handbag.

"Cheers, Kath. Now tell us all about yourself."

"Not a lot to tell, Alison."

"I'm sure there is. You're being modest. Where have you moved from?"

"London. Streatham to be exact. I retired a month ago. I was an administrative officer in the Metropolitan Police."

"That sounds exciting."

"It wasn't." She took a couple of gloomy sips from her glass.

Evie decided to change the subject. "What's your new place like? In Northgate Street, wasn't it?"

"The house is fine. It's the unwanted company that's the problem."

"Unwanted company?"

"Reggie...the rat."

"You've got a rat? But you've given him a name so he must be a friendly one."

"Oh, I liked him at first. But now I can't stand the sight of him."

"Is this rat of stocky build with a pointed nose and small ears?" I asked.

"Definitely. That's him to a tee."

"Yours is probably a Brown Rat then. My A-level class are dissecting a Brown Rat this term. Brown Rats are grey; Black Rats are brown. Confuses a lot of folk. Rats spread a lot of infectious

diseases. Weil's disease, rat bite fever, Cryptosporidiosis, viral haemorrhagic fever, Toxoplasmosis..."

"Alright, Nicky," said Alison. "That's enough diseases. You'll frighten poor Kath."

"I've already decided I want to get rid of him. He's become threatening and sinister. I was sitting on the loo having a pee yesterday when I looked up and saw him watching me with those ratty eyes of his, nose twitching. And he comes into the bedroom when I undress for bed. Gives me the heebie-jeebies."

Evie's eyes widened. "Bloody hell, Kath. That rat might be a reincarnation of some awful sex pervert." The three younger women giggled.

Kath was stoney faced. "I don't believe in reincarnation."

"You should contact a pest control company," suggested Alison. "Someone like Rentokil."

"I'd prefer to sort it out myself. Apart from anything else, it would be cheaper."

Alison had another idea. "I'm a librarian, Kath. I could bring some books about getting rid of rats if you're planning on coming back here next week."

"That sounds like a good plan, Alison. Thanks. I appreciate it. I find all the information on the internet very confusing."

The following Thursday we reassembled in the back bar at the pub. Kath had arrived early and was seated at the same table as the week before. Alison had a large shoulder bag from which she emptied three hardback books onto the table.

"There you are, Kath. These should help you to get rid of Reggie. I checked the books out in my name, so you can have them for a month."

"These look great, Alison." Kath began leafing through the volumes. "*Rats and How to Destroy Them*." She grimaced. "This is all about traps. There's one called the Terror Death Run Trap. And there's a chapter on fumigation. And another on drowning. That's all a bit too gruesome for me."

"What about this one?" Alison nudged the book over to Kath. "*Ferrets and Rats*. Apparently, ferrets are brilliant at catching rats. The author explains about how to keep and train them."

"I don't think so, thanks all the same. It sounds like having got rid of one pest I'd be saddled with a different one!" She thumbed through the third book. "Aha! This looks more like it. *Rat Investigation, Control and Prevention*. Says it's a practical guide. And look, there's a whole section on using poison. I'll borrow this one if I may?"

"If it's rat poison you're after, I could help with that," said Evie. "I'm a supervisor at DIY Super Mart on the outskirts of town. I could get you a staff discount. Just pop in. I'm there all day tomorrow."

Kath flicked through some pages halfway through the book. "Something sold under the name of RATRID seems to be the recommended one. Contains a substance called Brodifacoum. According to this it's highly lethal."

"Sounds ideal. Poor Reggie," I said. "At least in future you'll be able to use the bathroom without an audience. And if you're going to mix the poison with food, I happen to know from keeping them in our biology lab that rats are particularly fond of scrambled eggs."

"Eyes down!" said Mick.

The next Thursday Kath failed to turn up.

"That's strange," said Evie. "When she came into the store on Friday, she said she'd see us as usual for bingo this week. I hope she's alright."

"Well, we've no way of finding out," said Alison. "We don't know her surname, address or mobile phone number. Did she pay with a credit card when she purchased the poison, Evie? That would have had her name on it."

"She paid cash. Out of the brown envelope containing her bingo winnings."

A month later we were sipping our spritzers when Mick approached our table. "I had such a shock when I read about your mate in the local rag."

"Our mate?" I said.

"Kath. Her photo's on the front page. Recognised her immediately. I'll get it. It's behind the bar."

He returned and handed over the latest issue of *The Clarion*. On the front page was the headline 'LOCAL WOMAN CHARGED WITH HUSBAND'S MURDER'.

"Apparently she poisoned his scrambled eggs," Mick informed us.

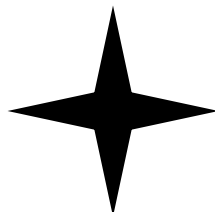
Evie bit her lower lip. Alison drew a sharp breath as she studied the newspaper. I put my head in my hands. There as plain as day was a picture of Kath in her fluffy jumper. Beside it was a photograph of a grey-haired man named as Reginald Smith. He was of stocky build with a pointed nose and small ears.

As Mick made his way back to the bar, I said what we must all have been thinking. "This makes us all accessories to murder. Alison, you helped Kath come up with a modus operandi. Evie, you supplied the poison. And I...I suggested the scrambled egg!"

The door to the back bar swung open and in through it plodded the familiar figure of Police Constable Tony Downton. To the astonishment of fellow pub goers, and with a synchronicity that would have qualified us for a gold medal in gymnastics, we three immediately dived under our table.

"Good evening, Tony," said Mick. "What brings you in here this time of day? Nothing serious, I hope."

"Was just passing by and thought I'd drop in to collect my winnings from last week's Bingo Blitz Night."



Ursula O'Reilly is a writer/artist living in County Cavan, Ireland. Her work is drawn from life experiences, mythology, and people/events, real or imagined.

Ursula's work has been published in several literary magazines including: 'Dawntreader magazine', 'Way Words', 'Vita Brevis Press', 'The Literary Yard', 'Poetry Plus magazine', 'Young Ravens Literary Review', 'Otherwise Engaged Literary and Arts Journal', 'Personal Bests Journal', 'The Green Shoe Sanctuary' 'Southern Arizona Press', and 'Lothlorien Poetry Journal'

HUBERT by Ursula O'Reilly ©

"The light was different the day I saw the elf. It wasn't dim, nor was it dazzling. It was something in between." Aunt Myrtle exclaimed.

"Twilight?" I ventured.

"Not twilight." she said, with a sly smile. "Elf Light."

"Elf what?"

"That's how I describe it." My aunt continued. "The light in the room was clear, luminescent." I raised my eyebrows and listened as she recounted the story of the elf.

I had felt close to Aunt Myrtle all my life. She and her husband, Ted, had lived down the road from my childhood home. My siblings and I spent many happy hours in their yard, playing with their cats, dogs, and chickens.

Having no children of her own, Myrtle enjoyed entertaining us. She would make our favourite cakes and desserts. and tell us stories. For me, the stories were the best part of every visit.

After her husband passed away, life became difficult for Aunt Myrtle. She was growing older, and poor health kept her housebound. By then I had moved away from our small town. I was working and living in the city, but I stayed connected with home. Lately I was sad to hear that Myrtle had sold her property and moved into a Nursing Home. As soon as I could arrange time off from my job, I drove back to my hometown to pay her a visit.

The Nursing Home was a pleasant, homely building. The staff were kind and approachable. I was relieved to find Myrtle seated in the comfortable sitting room, looking cheerful and well.

"Jessica! How wonderful to see you!" She greeted me with a warm hug. One of the carers brought us a tray of coffee, and we chatted. I was relieved to hear she was happy in the Home and had made new friends.

We reminisced about old times, and I reminded her of how I had loved her stories as a child. She smiled and patted my hand, her blue eyes glistening. Seated by the sunlit bay window, Myrtle looked several years younger than her eighty-five years. To my delight, she began to recount one of her stories. I felt a thrill of anticipation as I sat back in my chair to listen.

"The light was different the day the elf appeared," she began." And every time after that. Aunt Myrtle smiled sweetly and took a sip of coffee. She gazed into the distance and continued.

"It must be thirty years ago. It was a summer's day like today. I was cooking lunch for myself and Ted. I had opened the window, a warm breeze was blowing in. Suddenly, an eerie feeling came over me. I felt a change in the atmosphere in the room. Then I noticed the light in the room had changed, from yellow sunlight to a luminescent white glow.

I heard a noise behind me, a loud plop. Something had fallen from the open window onto the floor. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up. I turned around. A creature was sitting on the floor, rubbing its head and moaning."

"What did it look like?"

"It looked like a miniature person. About a foot tall. Unruly hair framed his small round face. He had bushy eyebrows, dark eyes, and a large bulbous nose. Dressed in trousers, shirt, and a waistcoat, complete with a watchchain." Aunt Myrtle's eyes filled with wonder. He eyed me crossly, rubbing his head and mumbling.

'Well now, my dear! Why not leave a table under that window to break a chap's fall? My poor head took quite a crack!'

I watched the scene in disbelief. I couldn't utter a word." my aunt continued. "The creature began to walk towards me. I backed away. To my surprise he began to laugh.

'Ha ha! Come now, Miss Myrtle. No need to fear! We shall be friends! An elf is the best friend a person can have.' His laugh was infectious, and I was soon smiling, despite my misgivings. "Aunt Myrtle's face took on an expression of delight. Her eyes twinkled. "He became exactly that," she said.

I gazed at my beloved aunt and smiled. The years appeared to have fallen away, and I was back in her farmhouse kitchen. "What happened next?" I asked.

"At the sound of the imp laughing, all fear left me. Something inside told me I could trust him. It didn't feel weird, it felt normal. We were soon chatting happily.

'Who are you?' I asked him. 'What are you doing in my kitchen?'

The creature sat on a footstool, next to the kitchen stove. 'Pour me a cup of your excellent tea, and I will tell you,' He answered.

'Elves drink tea?'

'Yes! Elves are extremely fond of tea!' he said. I looked in my cupboard and found a ceramic egg cup. I reached for the teapot and filled the egg cup, adding milk and sugar. I passed it to him.

'Just how I like it!' said the elf, crossing his legs and sipping the warm liquid. I poured myself a cup of tea and sat in the chair opposite. He began to talk.

He told me many things," said Aunt Myrtle. "His name was Hubert, and he had come to help me. I felt perplexed. I was an independent person who didn't like asking for help. I was the person others reached out to. This didn't make sense.

'I know you are having problems, Miss Myrtle.' he said.

'Problems? What problems?' I retorted. But I knew what he was referring to. My arthritis was getting worse. I was finding it hard to move around the house and yard, household chores were becoming difficult. Ted worked long hours on the farm. I didn't want to worry him.

I had neighbours who visited, but I spent many hours alone. My close friends had moved away from the area. I missed them. Sometimes I would sit and cry from sheer loneliness.

'What brought you here?' I asked the elf.

'You did,' he said.

'Me?'

'You asked for help, and I heard you. That's why I'm here.'

I remembered pleading silently for help when life felt like a struggle. But this? An elf in my kitchen? It was unbelievable!"

Myrtle stopped speaking when one of the carers came and took away the coffee cups. I was anxious to hear the rest of the story. She settled herself in the comfy armchair.

"The elf had finished his tea." my aunt said. "I took the egg cup from him and turned to place it in the kitchen sink. When I turned back around, he wasn't there. I searched the kitchen, then the house. He was gone."

"Did you ever see him again," I asked.

"Yes! Hubert was true to his word," she smiled. "From that day forward, whenever I was feeling down, or struggling to do my work, he would appear. As soon as I noticed the light changing, I knew he was nearby.

Whenever he was around, I felt better. Even the pain of my arthritis eased. After a time, my life improved, and it was all thanks to Hubert, my elf."

I grinned at my aunt. This was the best story I had heard in a long time.

"If I was reaching up to get something from one of the high cupboards, I would find him there. He would pass the objects to me." Aunt Myrtle chuckled. "Often, I would come down in the morning to find the dirty dishes in the sink, all washed, dried, and stacked neatly.

The floor would be swept and washed. Once or twice he even cleaned my windows! I never actually saw him doing the work. I would find it had been completed while I was out, or in bed. I knew it was Hubert."

"Amazing! I wish I had an elf!" I said. Myrtle laughed and nodded her head.

"Hubert stayed with me. He wasn't there all the time. But if I was having problems, feeling unwell or just lonely, he would appear. It was always when I was alone. Never in front of other people. Eventually I told my husband about him. Ted could see the change in my mood and general health. Everything had improved since I met Hubert. My arthritis was less painful, and I would smile and laugh more.

Ted thought I was losing my senses. He didn't believe me. He was a practical man, not given to flights of fancy. But he got a glimpse of the elf himself, on one or two occasions. After that he believed everything, and we were both much happier."

"Did anyone else ever see him?" I asked.

Aunt Myrtle gazed at me. "Not that I'm aware of, Jessica," she said. "Ted did see him, but the elf never spoke to him. I was the only one he talked to.

As the years passed, Ted and I accepted that Hubert was around and part of our lives. The elf helped me through many ups and downs. When my husband became ill and later when he passed away, Hubert was more important than ever. I don't know how I would have managed without him."

I gazed at my aunt. "I'm glad you came through all that."

"Yes," she continued. "I managed to carry on for some time. Finally, I could see that the best thing for me would be to move into a Nursing Home. I wasn't happy in the house without Ted, and my health was failing.

Hubert persuaded me to move in here. He checked the Home over before I decided and assured me it was the right place. The people were kind, he told me. I would be happy here. The elf had never given wrong advice; I trusted him completely. So, I sold the farm, packed up my belongings, and here I am."

I gazed at Aunt Myrtle. I had enjoyed her story, but now I felt uneasy. Was she losing her grasp on reality? "What about Hubert?" I ventured. "Did he stay at the farm?"

"No! He came along with me. We had been together for so long. He wasn't going to leave me now." Myrtle smiled her sweet smile and began to rise from the chair. "It's good to know he's around if I should need him."

I helped her stand up and passed her a walking frame. "Would you like to see my room, Jessica? It's just down the corridor."

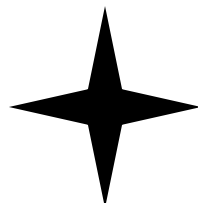
With a sinking heart I followed her to her room. I was pleased to note it was spacious and comfortable. All Aunt Myrtle's knick- knacks and ornaments were on display, making it feel like home.

"Come in, dear," she said. "Sit yourself down." I entered the room and sat on one of the chairs.

Then I noticed something queer. The light in the room was strange. Bright, but not glaring. Glowing oddly. I looked at my aunt and my eyes widened. "Aunt Myrtle." I said in a low voice. "The light..."

Myrtle's blue eyes twinkled knowingly. A smile quivered on her lips, and she took my hand in hers.

"Elf Light!" she said.



Canadian writer, **R.A.Lucas** wrote science-fiction and fantasy stories for broadcast in Montreal and Toronto through in the early 1970s. His short stories and poetry have been published in Canada, England, the United States, India, Australia and Norway. His memoir, *The Strathmore Stories* was a finalist in the 2021 Eyelands Book Awards. He recently finished a novel-length manuscript, and his fifth book of poetry will be published in 2027.

Becoming Louis by R.A.Lucas ©

Louis, or Louie to his family, and Lou to a tight circle of friends, lived a measured life. A life of staircase math, counting telephone poles, the number of pickets in a neighbour's fence, the click-clacking of railcar wheels over rail joints when he took the commuter that stopped at the top of his street to his monthly checkup at a family clinic one stop west.

Four hundred and eighteen, if anyone asked.

It was his father who instilled in him the joy of counting everything. Sitting at the breakfast table waiting for toast, his father would count the six teaspoons of coffee being dumped into the basket.

"How many cornflakes will you eat this morning?" he would ask Louis and Louis never knew until one morning he dumped them out, counted each one and put them back in the bowl before adding the milk. He began keeping notes. Three hundred and four on Monday, two hundred and ninety-eight on Tuesday. Louis became hooked, embracing an addiction he enjoyed the rest of his life, which amounted to 287,982 sunrises and sunsets, three marriages, eight dogs, nine cats and regrettably, no children.

"That's okay. Zero is a number too."

I came to know him late in his life. Bored with the scientific article I needed to finish writing, I went jogging. I took a break in a downtown park before attempting the hill back up to my home. I had closed my eyes and a few minutes later a shuffling noise made me open them just as a well-dressed elderly gentleman stopped in front of me and said, "Twenty-eight."

"Yes. Exactly. How did you know?"

"I started counting at the entrance," he said, "and this is the twenty-eighth bench on this path."

I started laughing, which caused the man to give me an angry look.

"I'm not laughing at you. I'm laughing at me. It's my birthday today. Twenty-eight. I thought..." He started laughing too. "My name is Ronald. Ron."

"Come on, Ronald, I'll buy you a coffee and a piece of cake. For your birthday. My name is Louis."

Two years, two months and eighteen days passed before Louis said I could call him Lou. I knew I had been welcomed into a very special friendship and we became good pals. Our

age and activity levels were different enough that we didn't hang out, but our paths would cross by accident or arrangement, and each encounter seemed to end with coffee and cake.

"Chocolate cake nine times, carrot eight, lemon poppyseed twelve times and a fudge brownie once," he said as I washed down the brownie with my second cup of coffee. I was about to ask how many coffees when he said, "Fifty-four," as if reading my mind.

"My father said the proper temperature for coffee was when the water boiled and the kettle whistled in the key of C. Every noise has a frequency," Lou loved to explain things. "It's just a fancy word for the number of times it vibrates in a single second. Middle C has a frequency of two hundred sixty-one," he paused, "point six three." And he smiled.

Lou began to hum, adjusting the pitch until he hit Middle C. It didn't sound like a kettle, but the sweet noise he made touched a place in my heart.

We shared a common passion for airplanes. Mine was the kind born of a desire to learn how to fly. His was as a test pilot in his twenties. We stumbled into the topic when discussing what the air force should buy to renew its fleet and I joked by mentioning the Avro Arrow. "If only," he replied. "I knew the Canuck, the CF-100, but not as a test pilot. Fully loaded it weighed 36,000 pounds at its maximum takeoff weight." I tried to make the conversion.

"We use kilograms now."

"Yes, I know," he said. "I was speaking in the vernacular of the era. Full up 16,329 kilos. They built 692 of them. First flew January 19, 1950."

A few months later, perhaps 118 days, after coffee and a far too generous slice of Boston Cream Pie, Lou turned his head and looked directly at me, and I hoped he might tell me more about his life as a test pilot, but he remained silent, the pause in conversation a little longer than usual. "One hundred and eighty," he said and then looked past me and gently and slowly closed his eyes as if weighing the meaning of the number.

"Pounds? Kilos? Flights?"

"Days. I've been given six months, 180 days. Three full moons."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm dying in the key of C." He looked at me for a moment and I nodded, letting him know I understood. "I've been up and down for a few months," he paused again. "Good days, bad days, lately a trend of more horrible days. You want the exact count?" I shook my head.

"How about another coffee?" I asked.

"How about we have a drink?"

The leather seats at one of Lou's old haunts were lined with miniature cracks like the skin on his hands and face. The Scotch didn't improve the conversation, but it was clear Lou had figured it out, counted and calculated the available options and concluded if it was terminal he wouldn't bother to get in the way of progress.

"How the hell can you call this progress?" I was angry. I didn't have a lot of friends

and of them all, I knew I would miss him the most.

"The cancer will progress until the point I will not. There's no argument there my young friend." He never used my name.

* * *

Fourteen days after the funeral a package arrived containing his collection of notebooks; the newest labelled Pills. A note in Lou's steady hand thanked me for my time and friendship and for caring for his remarkable yet strange life in numbers. One, much smaller and much older was his logbook. All the flights, destinations, takeoff and landing times. Forty-eight different types. His notebook on Parks listed their names alphabetically followed by the number of paths, lamps and benches, trees listed by kind and whether it had a playground. In the one labelled Bedtime, I expected a record of his sleep habits but discovered Lou had remained a true and adept lover almost to the very end, each encounter entered in surprising detail. I felt oddly ashamed to be reading the most intimate moments in the lives of two people I hardly knew.

Fifty-six minutes later my wife poked her head in.

"You okay Ronnie?"

"Lou's notebooks. Fifteen. A total of 2,250 pages, 47 of them blank. All of them with a date and time of entry at the top. Six different pens based on the colour of the ink or the width of the nib. None written in ballpoint." I stopped. My eyes widened to the point they hurt. I felt strange and I never feel strange. I'm a science writer.

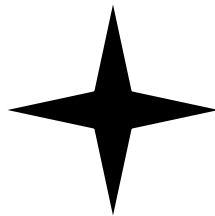
"So...you want a coffee...Louis?" She smiled.

"You know me well enough to call me Lou."

We laughed and I began to let go of my friend.

In the port a ship signaled it was casting off. Its horn sounded once, twice then a third long blow. Each blast a perfect Middle C, which carried across the busy city and up the hill on the cool evening air.

I began to wonder about the speed of sound.



Andrew Hart was born in Yorkshire, many years ago but now lives in Cheshire where he writes stories and works for the probation service, he dreams of being a pirate. His story have appeared in a variety of print and online magazines, both in the UK and abroad.

Last Things by Andrew Hart ©

"It appears just for a moment, I see it out of the corner of my eye, and then it is gone. I try to pretend that I am imagining it, but I know it is real, and it scares me."

"But what do you think it is?" I asked Godfrey, my only remaining friend.

"I don't know; I only ever catch a glimpse, a sense of movement. But of late it is becoming a bit more solid and I am seeing it more and more frequently; at first it was just very occasionally, but now every day, at least once, usually more."

"Have you gone to see an ophthalmologist?" I suggested.

"Yes, I had a whole load of tests, but nothing. Eventually I realised that whatever it was is real, not a problem with my eyes or my brain....."

Godfrey looked incredibly sad, and I wondered if I should hold his hand or give him a hug; we had been friends for over sixty years but I could not remember ever touching him, well not for many years.

"When did they start?"

"About three years ago, just a tiny flicker at first, I thought I must have mice, but it is becoming larger, and now it is like a large cat or small dog, just out of view, there for a moment and that's it....."

We drank our coffee, and looked out of the kitchen window into my back garden; a disappointing space considering the size of the house; drab and small, the fence was high stopping what little sunshine there was, getting through. I had hoped to spend my summers sitting out there, reading a book, but I was rarely tempted, and when I was, I only stayed out there for a few minutes before retreating indoors, where I felt cosy and safe.

"How are your neighbours? Any friendlier?" Godfrey asked.

"Not really. They are not rude, well not often, but I do feel isolated. When I only lived here for holidays...well I did not notice, and of course I had May so I did not....well it was okay. But now....."

"Do you think it was a mistake coming here?"

I thought about it; "wherever I would have ended up I would have been lonely. My life is shrinking. If I had stayed in Nottingham it would have just been the same."

"But you have your friends there....." and Godfrey smiled at me with something that resembled affection. Although actually most of my friends had died or had forgotten about me; even Gill, my closest friend at work had disappeared from my life soon after I retired.

What worried me was that I was actually starting to enjoy my isolation, whilst I liked Godfrey - we had been friends on and off since sixth form - I did not want him here; I had my routine and the noise he made, using the bathroom, walking up and down the stairs, eating his dinner annoyed me more and more. And there was the smell; an alien scent, not unpleasant, but

alien nonetheless, hard to describe, some kind of aftershave, but also of damp laundry, never overwhelming but always there, and which would linger long after he had returned home.

Would I have felt the same about May if she had lived longer? Obviously I loved her, but even when we were married I liked to spend time on my own. My need for peace upset her when we first married.

"You haven't seen me all day, and now you just want to read."

I shrugged, "I just need a bit of quiet, just for half an hour. I have been people getting at me all day" I explained.

"I am not people getting at you...I am your wife." And she put her clothes back on and went downstairs. Eventually she got used to it and learned to give me time and space, fortunately we hadn't had children, because I don't think they would have respected such boundaries as May learned to.

Godfrey and I went out for a walk the next morning; he was going after lunch so I was feeling happier, and prepared to indulge him. I noticed how slowly he was walking, and halfway down the lane to the town centre he stopped for a few minutes to gather his breath.

"I haven't been feeling too good of late" he admitted. "I went to Queens for tests on my heart but they could not find anything or they wouldn't tell me."

"Of course they would tell you. We are just getting old that's all..."

But he did not look well, pale and sweating, and this short walk had clearly exhausted him.

We started to walk again, but I realised that he was distracted, not listening to what I said.

"Are you okay?"

"Sure..." He murmured after a moment.

"Is it that thing you mentioned?"

He nodded, just there behind the trees, but it has gone now.

"Remember when we inter-railed?"

Godfrey smiled, "what a great time that was, and now a few days in North Wales have left me knackered."

"Yes I cannot imagine how we did it. But there is plenty of life in us both yet." But I am not sure I believed it. And I noticed how scared he looked despite my best efforts to distract him. We saw a couple of villagers who I knew by sight, but none of them said hello or gave us a wave, it was as if I was just as much a stranger as Godfrey was.

We sat in the café, where I had been coming since May and I bought the house in the late 1990s, and yet the waitresses did not call me by my name or ask how I was.

"Have you never thought of learning Welsh" my friend asked, "it might help..."

"I did try" I hushed my voice, not wishing the staff to overhear me, although I doubted they could care less. "I tried a few words here when ordering my coffee and cake, but they just replied in English, I soon gave up."

"Well I am sure they all speak English anyway."

"Here they do, although when I am out and about it is Welsh you hear. And in the smaller villages, some of them don't know any English at all. At Bangor University they even have English lessons for some of their Welsh students...."

"Isn't that where May went?"

"Yes, that's why we came here and bought the house. She loved it round here, but...well it is perhaps for the best she died when she did, I think she would have become disillusioned living here all year round."

"Don't say that."

"Why not, it is true."

As I watched him drive off, I saw something dark move, as if following the car, and rapidly it disappeared down the drive, it could have been a cat or some other kind of wildlife, being out in the sticks I often saw strange creatures, but this seemed unworldly and I then believed what Godfrey had told me.

And then unbidden came the thought that this would be the last time I would see Godfrey, I am not sure what it was exactly, and I tried to dismiss the thought but it persisted. And so it proved; he was dead within a month, a heart attack as he walked along the canal where he lived in Beeston. His son rang me and we talked about his dad.

"He was terribly lonely towards the end, obviously he and my mum split up when I was still at home, and although he had a couple of girlfriends, nothing lasted. I think that you were the only friend he had left."

"Oh, for him too."

And I looked through my photographs of our trip around Europe, and wept more than I had done when May died.

Unfortunately I was not feeling up to the drive, when the funeral came along, so I stayed at home and thought about my friend and how I been unable to take his fears seriously. I thought of last things, many I had not realised I would not do again, going to Meadow Lane to watch Notts County, the last concert I had been to (no decent music within travelling distance for me now), my last trip to the pub, my last holiday and now the death of my last friend.

Then there was the last time that May and I had made love a few days before she went to hospital for a few tests which were "probably nothing"; we had not done it that much of late, she was too tired and low, but that afternoon she clung to me with passion, as if trying to stop me escaping from her, and that was the last time we lay in each other's arms, as she snored gently and I stroked her hair.

And I remembered the last time we kissed a few days later; I was about to leave the hospital and I could tell she did not want me to go but I was tired and hungry, so I bent down and kissed her on the lips; they felt cold and lifeless and she looked at me with infinite sadness.

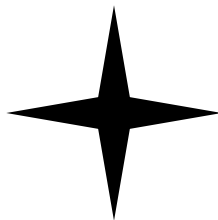
"I will be back tomorrow" I told her, but an hour later, just as I had put on my pyjamas and was heading to bed, they rang me to say she was dead.

That afternoon, after Godfrey had gone, I had looked up at the hills which surrounded our small town and realised that was why we had moved here, and why I continued to stay. They were dark and beautiful, as if from a different world, full of strange and mysterious things, perhaps Merlin or the ancient Celtic Gods and Goddesses dwelt there, looking down on us mortals with our petty lives.

I thought of going for a long walk, maybe not in the mountains, but at least out past the village and see where I would get to. I put two bottles of water and some chocolate into a small ruck sack I had bought several years ago, and looked for my walking shoes. But as I did so I realised that there was no way I could walk any distance, that I would be tired and need to urinate, so with a sigh I put the bag and sat down in the sitting room, even too tired to read my book. I must have fallen asleep immediately, because I woke several hours later, the sky was dark, my back hurt and my bladder was full.

Lying here in hospital I remember Godfrey and the black shadow that followed him in his last days, and how it frightened him so much. I wonder if May had the same thing; did she know that she was going to die, perhaps when we made love that final time, a black shadow was there, in the corner of our bedroom, watching and waiting, knowing it was only a matter of time.

And now, in this quiet ward, full of the old and dying, where nurses and visitors whisper quietly in Welsh, I too know that there is a dark shadow in this ward, just out of sight, I call to it sometimes, willing it to come closer and to take me in its embrace.



Kenneth M. Kapp was a Professor of Mathematics, a ceramicist, a welder, an IBMer, and yoga teacher. He lives with his wife in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, writing late at night in his man-cave. He enjoys chamber music and mysteries. Please visit www.kmkbooks.com. His stories have appeared in more than eighty publications world-wide including *The Saturday Evening Post* and *October Hill Magazine*.

Teddy Bear Picnic by Kenneth M. Kapp ©

Ellen stood in front of the sink, her hands on her hips. She could hear Stanley reminding Gregory to brush his teeth. She smiled when his warning that "You only have one set of teeth" was counted with, "Well, when Joey lost his tooth in class last week the teacher said he shouldn't worry, 'These are your baby teeth. You'll get your permanent teeth in the next couple of years.' So I figure I don't have to be so careful." *We had to warn him that bad habits can bite back when he grows up. Stan showed him some pictures of rotten teeth from the internet which convinced him. Now we don't have to remind him all that often.*

She turned on the hot water and gathered up the dirty dishes from the table, putting them with the others in the dish tub. She spritzed soap into the tub and moved the faucet over the tub. Watching the bubbles she remembered how 9 years ago she and Stan had taken a bath together after making love. *I wonder if that was when I got pregnant? He was so needy then. I was a senior in high school and he was in his last year at the voc tech college studying to be a dental technician. Said he wanted to do better in life than just being a tradesman like his father. He blew bubbles in my face, confessing that he was named after Stanley tools. I teased him, 'Yeh, they make great screwdrivers,' and blew bubbles back.*

I'm glad we had Greg. It was tough; I couldn't do much more than graduate, throwing up all the time. But Stan had a job lined up and we got married in June. Felt like I was the stuffed turkey by the end of November. Good thing Greg was born December 1. Easy to remember.

Ellen finished the dishes and wiped down the counters. She glanced at the clock: 7:30. *Stan should be reading him a bedtime story.* She closed the kitchen door and took out the bread and makings for their lunch, smiling since Greg liked to brag that he ate just like his Dad. "I'm going to grow up at least as tall as Daddy. Feel these muscles." She was glad that they both liked sprouted grain breads. And she always gave them a couple of raw vegetables and a piece of fruit. Greg was already saying he wanted to be a dentist. "Dad can help me then. I'll be a good boss." And then Stanley would say, "First thing I'm going to do is ask for a raise."

Ellen spread crunchy peanut butter on the bread. *We barely get by, can't save much; don't know how Greg's going to go to college, never mind dental school. We're still in an apartment; I shouldn't complain – it's two bedrooms. Told Stan I should go to the voc tech, maybe become a legal secretary or something, but don't know how we'd pay for that. Stupid, like the politicians want to keep people poor, making it impossible to get educated.* She sliced the sandwiches diagonally and put them in the plastic bags they used all week. She sighed and put everything back in the refrigerator.

Stanley peeked in the kitchen. "How are you doing?"

"Just finishing up the lunches for my men."

"OK if I sit down in the living room? I'm kind of beat."

"Yeh, sure. I'll come in after I finish up."

Ten minutes later, Ellen sat down on the couch next to Stanley. The TV was on silent. He reached over and squeezed her hand, gently kissing her forehead. "He's sleeping surrounded by his teddy bears. Tommy Teddy's got guard duty tonight. Greg said he should sit on top of his dresser. 'Like a sentinel, Dad. I saw it in a movie last week on TV.' He's got the other two either side of his pillow. Didn't know what I was starting when I bought Barry the Bear after you came home from the hospital. Good thing he's a black bear and we've got matching gorilla tape to hold him together. You have a good day?"

"Sort of. I took Greg with me grocery shopping. He wanted to get some blueberries but they're out of season and way too expensive. I had to tell him we couldn't afford that. He looked at me funny. I explained, 'You know, Greg, we can't always get everything we want. But we do alright. Warm clothes for winter, wholesome food – that's important.' He smiled, put the small pint box back and said, 'OK.'

"You know, maybe I can get a part-time job like we talked about or go to the voc tech like you did. Wouldn't hurt none."

Stanley released her hand and turned to face her. He ran his hand against the bristles on his chin. "I don't know. But we talked about maybe having another kid. How could you do that working or in school?"

"Somehow, I guess. But we'd need a bigger apartment or something if we had two kids. You going to get another job? I know bagging groceries doesn't make much, but it is something. That's why I thought of school. I got to be better than just making peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, and don't go telling me I make *great* peanut butter and jelly sandwiches!"

"Yeh, alright. But we did talk about looking for one of those small houses, starter homes. Payments wouldn't be much more than our rent and my dad could help a little. Besides, he said it's not too difficult to raise a dormer, put in a couple of bedrooms. I helped on a job like that when I was in high school. Me and Dad and his trades buddies could do most of the work. They swap jobs for family projects all the time. It's something to think about. You know how excited you were when we looked two months ago – and then you got cold feet."

Ellen started to bite her nails.

"El, please. Let's not get stuck. You can't go through life always being scared. Yeh, it's hard but we got each other. And don't forget Greg. My Dad's doing well, said 'What's all my money for if I can't help my kids.' And your mom is always offering to babysit. At least think about it."

"Yeh. Look, I got to go to the bathroom. Maybe you can find something we can watch on TV, like a nature program."

Ellen splashed water on her face. Her acne was breaking out again. *Stress, all the magazines talk about stress and how it kills your complexion. And when I pass my reflection in a store window, I'm all bent over, like an old woman. Mom's always telling me to straighten up. I shouldn't be so afraid. That's what Sally's always telling me. 'What's life without risks? No one ever said it'd be a picnic!'*

She dried her face and straightened the hand towels on the racks. She sighed. *Greg's always asking to take his teddy bears with us on a picnic. I'll tell Stan I'll think about it, I mean all*

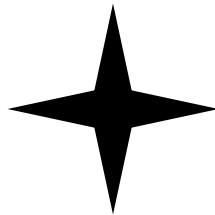
of it, but he has to think about me going to the voc tech. I'm just so tired of being a house wife; it's killing me.

She stared at herself in the full-length mirror on the back of the bathroom door and was frightened to find her reflection reminded her how she looked when she was 15 all hunched over, trying to hide her budding breasts.

She peeked in Greg's room. He was asleep, rolled over on his right side hugging Barry. He explained years ago how his bears protected him at night when he was sleeping. "It's only fair. I watch out for them all the time I'm awake. And with their big brown eyes they can see good at night."

She sat down close to Stanley; he had found a travel program. The host was somewhere in Italy; the volume was low.

Ellen drew him closer and rubbed her cheek against his bristles. "You know, you're my bear and I think maybe if it's nice Sunday we should all go on a picnic. Greg could take all his bears. It'll be our own teddy bear picnic."



Derek McMillan is a writer in Durrington in the UK. His editor is his wife, Angela. He has written for print and online publications in the UK, USA and Canada. His latest book is the audio-book with the cheery title "Murder From Beyond the Grave" which is available on eBay.

Don't Cry for Me by Derek McMillan ©

Vittorio Argentina had a very difficult time at school. His fellow students sang "THAT SONG" from Evita every time he came into a room. In the end he learnt to grin and bear it and after moderately successful exam results he got a good job in the local biscuit factory in Nether Sodbury.

The first I heard of this man was when his wife Amelia came to the station in a state of distress.

"I am very worried about my husband."

"Is he missing?"

"He says he is off on a business trip but I don't believe it."

I waited, she continued.

"I rang the factory and they said he was on a day's leave and there is another thing."

She produced a laptop.

"I took this out of his suitcase while he was in the bathroom."

She showed me the entry for that day. It said nothing about a business meeting but there were a series of numbers 00h 36m 42s followed by 06, 06, 47.

The numbers didn't mean anything to Mrs Argentina and as we watched the screen, the numbers changed.

She sat down and I provided a cup of tea. She reflected on Mr Argentina.

"I know he has his little peccadillos but he always comes back to me. I don't mind his fancy women because, to be honest, they keep him off my back. However, there is this."

She delved into her shopping bag and came up with a gun. It was a Glock 17.

"Now you don't need one of these for selling biscuits, do you?"

I agreed.

I put the diary post on the chat but nobody came up with any ideas. I had to resort to showing it to my son who is the nearest thing we have to a boffin.

"Well it is obviously a set of astronomical co-ordinates," he remarked. He then went on to talk about azimuths and declinations for a bit and I confess that all went over my head somewhat. There are of course five completely different systems of astronomical co-ordinates in case things were getting too simple.

"So," I sought to clarify, "is it a position in space?"

"Oh no. You see it keeps changing and that means it is an object in space. I will have a quick look and let you know what it might refer to."

His quick look took three hours but you have to admire his tenacity.

"It's an asteroid. It is one of the named asteroids, 'Celeste.'"

I updated the chat and gave full credit to my son. I didn't want anybody discussing the music of the spheres with me.

The following day, a body was found by a council workman in Nether Sodbury. The poor woman had been stabbed and left in a ditch. There was nothing to implicate Vittorio Argentina except the name. It was Samuels, Celeste Samuels.

It would be three days before the report of the killing would appear in the local rag and of course it would not immediately be connected with Mr Argentina.

However, there was a very good chance that his wife could be in danger from her wayward husband. I advised her accordingly and she discovered an urgent need to go and visit her sister.

We had Vittorio in for preliminary questioning. Of course we expected him to deny everything but he didn't,

"I am absolutely fascinated by asteroids, aren't you?"

I made a non-committal noise so he went on to explain how the asteroids were formed and how the gravitational pull of Jupiter attracted a lot of the matter and so forth. He knew nothing about Celeste Samuels.

"But what an interesting name. Did you know there was an asteroid with the same name?"

I did.

In a village, people are always interested in everyone else's business. The attitude of Celeste Samuels' neighbours was unusual. They knew nothing about her. They had seen no visitors call at her door in South Street. All one neighbour was prepared to say was that "That woman were no better than she should be." The neighbour refused to elaborate.

The gun revealed very little too. We went over the laptop with what they used to call a fine tooth comb. There had been no forays into the dark web to seek illegal firearms. Mr Argentina denied all knowledge of the gun and he protested that he had no firearms' licence, which turned out to be true.

CSO Francis Skinner remarked, "Why on earth would a man who knows his laptop and his gun have been taken from his case then go on to commit murder?"

I was beginning to wonder that too.

Francis went to visit Vittorio Argentina. Amelia had taken my advice and taken a prolonged visit to her sister.

"What do you think about that?"

"I don't know what to think."

"Did you know Celeste Samuels?"

"I have already told your sergeant about that. I can show you a picture of the asteroid if you like."

Francis does not mind listening to about half an hour about asteroids. If there were a police award for patience, he would get it. He took Amelia's desktop computer into custody.

My son is an unofficial unpaid advisor to West Sussex police now. He wanted a badge but I asked him what his friends would think about it and he went off the idea. I gave him Mrs Argentina's desktop computer and he soon retrieved the erased files.

She had communicated with a Paul Aldridge by email and the emails were about a "contract" which he was going to carry out. A look at her bank account showed she had paid Mr Aldridge five hundred pounds.

We have been unable to locate Mr Aldridge and that part of the case remains unsolved.

Francis went to collect Amelia. For his own reasons he talked to her about asteroids. He was subjected to a stream of abuse as soon as he started. He smiled.

"Do you know a Mr Aldridge?"

“Never heard of him.”

“Are you sure? You paid him five hundred pounds.”

She paused.

“The ruddy idiot was only supposed to make it look like an attempted murder. He was not supposed to kill her.”

I paused, she continued.

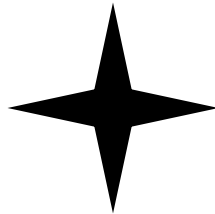
“I knew Vittorio was going to see Celeste. He was obsessed with her because of the ruddy asteroid.”

“And the gun?”

“Was mine.”

“Can you promise me that I will go to a prison where nobody talks for hours about asteroids?” she continued.

I couldn't of course, but I said 'Yes' anyway.



Sarah Das Gupta is a retired teacher from Cambridge, UK. She has also lived and taught in India and Tanzania. Her work has been published in many magazines and anthologies including: 'The American Literary Review', 'Songs of Eretz', 'New English Review', 'Pure Haiku', 'Green Ink', 'Carmina', 'Lothlorian', 'Literaria', 'Berlin Review', 'Black Poppy' and others.

ELECTED SILENCE by Sarah Das Gupta ©

As the hammer blows echoed across the fields, Lauren glanced sideways at the boy standing beside her. He must have been fifteen at least. He was two classes above her at school, though he rarely attended. Yes, he was small for his age and seemed almost scared to meet her gaze. Yet, Luke was relaxed there, in the field with her father, the horses grazing quietly in the distance, the dogs busy sniffing along the hedgerow.

“Here Luke, grab this post. I need to give it another bash,” her father called to the boy who was absorbed in watching the dogs now off on the scent of a rabbit.

Lauren noticed how he nodded in response, walking over to hold the large spruce post. He never even flinched as the sound of the heavy sledge hammer broke the peace of the early summer morning.

"Thanks, great job – only a couple to go," her father said, picking up an old sack which served as a tool box.

They moved on down the hedgerow. Luke was dragging the two remaining posts. Her father, in his ancient mac, tied up with orange binder twine, dragged the sack through the long grass, the tools inside jangling as he went.

The dogs, tired of looking for phantom rabbits, had made off to a more promising hunting ground. Their frantic barking rang across the valley from the wood beyond.

"Luke, why don't you go and bring those damned dogs back? Lauren can help with the last two posts."

In seconds, a figure in old jeans and a bright red t-shirt could be seen on the other side of the valley, near the dark edge of the wood. Lauren held the post rather gingerly as the heavy hammer blows resounded, a little too near her fingers for comfort.

As they were finishing the final post, the two beagles appeared, their black and tan coats shining in the sun. They trotted quietly along in front of Luke as if they were the most obedient of hounds and the thought of rabbits had never entered their heads. They looked back waiting for the boy who bent down, fondling the dogs' ears, and seeming to whisper to them but Lauren never saw his lips move.

It was already autumn and the ground round the field gate where the horses collected was a foot deep in mud. Lauren could feel her wellingtons in danger of being sucked off. As she was leading a pony out through this quagmire, she caught sight of Luke struggling to open a shed door. He seemed to be holding something fragile in his hand. She remembered her

father had given him the old garden hut as a refuge for the various small mammals, birds and insects he often rescued.

Later that evening, after shutting up the chicken, Lauren quietly opened the shed door, closing it behind her. She was surprised to see Luke sitting on an old stool patiently feeding a brown bird with tiny pieces of minced meat. He had fixed a torch on the shelf behind him so he had enough light for the task. The torch threw strange shadows on the wooden walls of the hut and framed Luke and the trembling bird as in a picture. He hardly looked up at Lauren's entrance but continued his patient efforts to persuade the frightened bird to eat. Lauren gazed into the dark space beyond the circle of light. She could hear strange noises of scurrying feet, fluttering wings and occasional squeaking. Nodding quickly at Luke, still engrossed in his efforts, she slipped quietly through the door.

That night, Lauren asked her father about Luke, the creatures in the old shed and the boy's silence.

"What's wrong with him, Dad? He never says a word. It's quite spooky!"

"There's nothing wrong with a nice bit of peace and quiet. Most kids talk far too much. Luke's a great boy. He just can't speak in a big group or to strangers, people he doesn't trust. Apparently, it's called 'selective mutism' in medical books. To me, he's amazing with animals and we get on like a house on fire."

With this her father picked up the newspaper. For him the discussion was over.

One evening, a few weeks later, the phone rang. It was the Chairman of the local Cricket Club and he certainly had not phoned for a pleasant chat.

"Your damned horses are on the village cricket pitch. They're making a hell of a mess. Looks like a ploughed field! Hoof prints all over the place..."

Lauren quickly pulled on her boots and grabbed her coat, following her father into the yard. He had already started the car as she jumped in. Several expletives later, amidst angry comments from her father as to why people shouted, instead of using a telephone, they drew up in front of the cricket pavilion.

In the darkness they could see shadows wandering over the sacred grass, some actually eating it. Walking round the crease at the pavilion end, even Lauren, never a cricket fan, could see the damage and feel it through her rubber boots.

Suddenly a shadow, human rather than equine, appeared from the edge of the sports field. Luke walked quietly up to Corky, the leader of the pack and the most obstinate. The boy patted the grey horse, stroked his neck and held him gently by the forelock. As the horse and boy walked off down the lane leading home, one by one the others followed. The sound of metal on the flinty lane echoed strangely in the darkness. Lauren's father's only comment as they drove back was, "A good thing if more people kept quiet."

It was the beginning of the Spring Term, one of those rare February days when the pale winter sun entices early daffodils and crocuses to break through the frosty earth. Lauren sat on the wall at the end of the school playground. She was eating crisps and watching girls practising their shooting with a netball which often got tangled up with junior girls skipping.

Suddenly, she heard shouting and the sounds of fighting on the other side of the wall. Here was a patch of rough grass leading down to the boundary fence. There was a struggling heap of boys who seemed to be intent on kicking someone or something underneath this heaving pile. Elbows and legs were viciously directed at the unseen target!

Loudly, the school bell rang the end of morning break. Boys began to extricate themselves from the tangled heap. Straightening their ties, tucking in their shirts, they ran back to school. Looking back, one boy yelled, "Luke Mortimer, you're not even a bloody monkey. They can at least open their bloody mouths."

Lauren looked at Luke, his hair tangled, almost garrotted by his tie, blood dripping from his bruised nose. She jumped down from the wall, but before she could say anything, Luke had clambered over the back fence and run off down the lane.

After school, Lauren was in the long barn which housed the incubators. At this time of year, the goslings were beginning to hatch. Sometimes her father would give the young birds a

helping hand by making a small hole in the shell or cracking it slightly. As she looked at the youngsters which had just hatched, Lauren gently put them under a warm lamp to dry off. Hearing footsteps, she turned to see Luke standing behind her.

He was in his usual t-shirt and jeans. His nose looked bruised, but otherwise there was no sign of the fight that morning. He picked up one gosling which seemed unable to stand. Every time it struggled to its webbed feet, its legs gave way. It ended up with its orange legs uselessly splayed beneath it. Cradling the small bird in his hand, Luke reached in his pocket for a ball of string and some old matchsticks. Silently handing the gosling to Lauren, Luke carefully tied a matchstick to each leg. The bird was completely still as if it knew these improvised splints would give it a chance of survival. Lauren saw the smile on Luke's face as the gosling and his matchsticks walked across the pen to claim a place under the light.

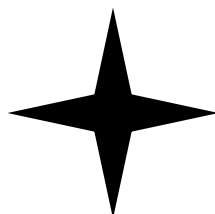
Late March, trees were beginning to come into leaf. It would soon be time for the early horse shows and gymkhanas. Riding along through the woods, her mind filled with thoughts of the approaching summer, Lauren was not prepared for a sudden gunshot close to the edge of the bridlepath. Her pony, perhaps dreaming of spring grass, was equally startled. It shied quickly to the right and bolted back up the track, leaving Lauren in a muddy puddle with an agonising pain in her ankle.

Time was passing and it was already quite dark in the woods. Lauren had managed to pull herself up onto the drier grass at the side of the path. She had a throbbing headache and her ankle had swollen so that she couldn't take her boot off. Every time she tried to stand, she fell back into the long grass. It was impossible to put any weight on her right foot. She knew the woods well but as night fell, it was a different matter. The trees became strange, dark shapes and she could hear something moving in the grass. An insect ran over her hand, an owl was hooting close by. A tear ran slowly down her cheek. Why did she never listen?

Dad had told her to always have her mobile in her pocket.

At last, in the distance, she could see a torch light which seemed to be bobbing along under its own steam. Lauren tried to shout out, scream, yell, anything to get attention. Nothing came out. She was completely dumbstruck.

As the light came nearer, she could see a familiar figure, an old duffle coat over a red t-shirt and jeans. Lauren had never been so relieved to see anyone as she was to see Luke emerge from the darkness. She was to overcome to speak. Bending down, Luke looked at the swollen ankle. He spoke softly and slowly, "We looked everywhere, no luck. I knew the wood was the last chance. Lean on me. By the way, that gosling with the splints is doing fine."



QUICK READS

Shirley Medhurst. Born and raised in Lancashire, England, I left for France, aged eighteen, in search of adventure. After several years spent travelling then teaching English, I settled in France. After recently opting for early retirement, I self-published a historical novel about women's fight for equality in the 1910s. I currently spend most days tending to my unruly garden or indulging my love of language by writing short-stories for pleasure.

The Shriek by Shirley Medhurst ©

Why, oh why, did I have that beer? I should've known it would go straight through me. I sigh, zipping up my jeans in haste. Hearing the faint opening notes of my favourite track, I curse out loud. Damn! I'm going to miss it. The racket of the hand dryer almost drowns out the lyrics. Then, I also make out snapping and popping noises. Whatever is that? Firecrackers?

The dryer stops... along with the music. That's odd! The band have stopped playing mid-song. The sporadic crackling of the firecrackers continues. Hang on! Fireworks? Inside? Surely not!

I hear deafening crashes, muffled shouts and what sounds like screams. Beside me, a gangly, mini-skirted teenager stops touching up her lipstick, hand midway to her mouth. She stares into the mirror; we exchange puzzled expressions.

There's a shriek of laughter. Or just a shriek. Without the laughter. No laughter at all. It's more like a shriek of terror; a shrill, blood-curdling scream, tailing off into a long, low wail which sends shivers slithering down my spine. My blood runs cold; cold as ice. No. Colder than that! As the awful whimper dies away, the dense shroud of silence which fills its place is worse. Something's wrong! Whatever's happening? The girl and I stand, frozen, staring at each other.

Thudding footsteps in the corridor directly outside the door breaks the silence, and a guttural, foreign-sounding voice snaps out terse orders. We both remain inert as we hear muted voices and feet shuffling past the flimsy formica door, which reverberates as someone leans against it. I pray, with all my heart, that the door holds steady. There follows more angry words. I'm not remotely religious, but the moment I realise the footsteps are receding, I close my eyes and send thanks to God... Allah... or whoever else might be listening. The pounding of my heart, which I hear so clearly, must surely be audible. The young girl's dark eyes are round as saucers, pupils so dilated I cannot make out the colour. She does not blink. Her partly painted lips are half scarlet, half pink; stark against her deathly-white face. I wonder if my expression looks as terror-stricken as hers. Scarcely daring to breathe, I raise a trembling forefinger to my lips. She nods. We remain immobile in the narrow space between the cubicles and handbasins. Understandably, there's nobody else here; the concert began twenty minutes ago.

Time passes. How much time? I've no idea. We are probably very unsafe here, yet we dare not leave. My ragged breathing threatens to deafen me. A vivid image of my two-year-old son flits through my mind. I clamp a trembling hand over my mouth to stifle a sob. Will I ever see him again? The girl flips her phone onto silent. These tiny actions break our paralysis. We must

do something! Anything!

My eyes drift upwards. From the false ceiling above the handbasins, a tile hangs loose. The girl follows my gaze and we share the same thought. Could we? The very thought strikes me as insane and I feel the beginnings of a hysterical giggle. Then, the sound of that gruff voice barking orders in the corridor galvanizes us into action. Needs must!

I swallow the lump in my throat and gesture for her to climb up first; she is taller and will be able to reach up easier. Soundlessly and with sheer determination, we find the superhuman strength to hoist ourselves up and into a tiny gap alongside grimy pipes and dusty cobwebs. We are obliged to kneel in the cramped space. I'm not sure how long we continue hugging each other, but it feels like an eternity. Pins and needles come and go; I am too tense to move. I now know her name is Jessica. Eyes screwed shut, I concentrate upon the image of my darling son's face. Jessica's breathing and mine slow in unison.

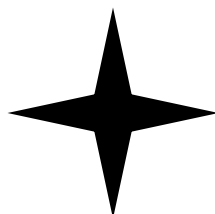
A single crack of gunfire spits us out into the present. Jessica's nails dig deeper into my arms, but the pain is somehow comforting. I only realise I am biting my lip when I feel a tiny trickle of warm blood on my chin. There are four sporadic shots, then an interminable barrage of ear-splitting gunfire. Then silence. Deafening silence!

Below, somebody crashes into the toilets, slams each cubicle door open, then leaves just as rapidly. Was it friend or foe? Is it safe to make ourselves heard? Could this be the end of the nightmare? After an age, Jessica shakily sends a text to her mother, who informs the police that we are hiding in the ceiling above the Ladies'. It is only when a team of firefighters wearing shiny silver helmets arrive to coax us down that tears begin to flow.

Being rescued feels even more surreal than being stuck above the toilets. A ruddy-faced fireman with a frizzy red beard reaches for my trembling hand and pulls me gently towards him, assuring me it's okay, that our ordeal is over. His hands are calloused and rough, yet warm and comforting. As the gentle giant with the shiny helmet leads me through a labyrinth of corridors, he maintains a soothing soliloquy in a low, crooning, sing-song voice. At one point, he turns, gives me a toothy grin, and tells me he's a gardener in his spare time. He doesn't tell me his name and doesn't ask for mine, but it doesn't matter; I cling desperately to the reassuring warmth of that friendly human touch. Wrapped in a shimmering gold blanket, I lean into his strong, protective embrace as he ushers me out of the concert hall.

Outside, a chaotic scene of devastation meets my eyes and I stumble. Gazing around, open-mouthed, at a sea of ambulances and flashing lights, I feel estranged from this world. Sound is distorted; people mill about in slow motion.

But we are safe! Jessica and I are amongst the few lucky concert-goers who will get to go home tonight.



Alice Baburek is an avid reader, determined writer and animal lover. She lives with her female partner and four canine companions. Retired, she challenges herself to become an unforgettable emerging voice.

Salvation Alley by Alice Baburek ©

The tall stranger leaned against the unlit lamppost and hid within the shadows. He watched as his “soul” mate rushed out of the grocery store with the bag of stolen money and a gun.

Michael had warned him and gave the robber his last chance at redemption. Unfortunately, the man refused. Now it was up to Saul to escort his soul mate to his eternal destination.

Aaron Stuger raced across the deserted parking lot. He jumped inside his beat-up Toyota Corolla and started the engine. His breath labored from the intense adrenaline pumping through his young veins. A wicked smile crawled across his sweating face. He did it! A score worth bragging about. Maybe now he’ll be taken as a serious competitor.

As he floored the old car out of the dark lot, Aaron could hear sirens in the distance. Too little too late. He laughed out loud, then glanced at the bag filled with money and the gun. He grimaced as he thought about the clerk he shot in the chest. He didn’t really have to do it. The clerk was cooperative. But Aaron wanted to shoot the man.

And as Aaron felt the rush of adrenaline once again, he was blinded by the looming headlights coming directly at him.

**

Saul waited patiently as Aaron came out of the depths of silence. He stared at the twenty-ish-year-old man. What a waste of life. He had so many things going in his favor, yet he listened to the dark side and all its empty promises. And where did it get him? Dead.

Aaron sat up. The white sheet slipped down to his bare waist. He stared ahead. The room was dimly lit. His mind tried desperately to focus. As he slightly turned his head, he could see a tall man to the side. His arms were crossed. The blue T-shirt and jeans were snug. His manicured hair was peppered. Oval glasses perched on his slender nose.

“Where...where am I?” Aaron’s voice is raspy. “And...who are you?”

Saul let out a huge sigh. It wasn’t hard for someone to show compassion and empathy. But this guy did not care for either one, nor did he even bother to try.

"In the morgue...and I'm Saul. I'm your guardian angel. It's my job to escort you to the afterlife, Aaron." He took a step closer to the man on the stainless-steel table.

"What? Come on, man. I don't believe in any of that..." Immediately, Saul held up his hand. Aaron did not bother to finish.

"Well, Aaron, that's part of the problem. It's why you're in the predicament you are right now, lying dead on a cold slab in the morgue."

Aaron looked down at himself. His chest is a pasty color. A huge Y-shaped incision was sewn. His eyes opened wide.

"What...what happened to me?" he cried.

"You robbed a store, shot a clerk and drove your car into a tree. You did not survive. Anything else you want to know?" Saul leaned in and lightly touched the young man's shoulder.

Instantly, Aaron was dressed in a black shirt and black jeans. Saul stepped away. "It takes a while to realize you don't really need to wear clothes on the other side. But seeing them...helps with the adjustment. And you're going to need all the help you can get."

The dim light flickered. Out of the shadowed corner emerged another man. This one is even taller and more muscular. Wavy brown hair. Maybe in his thirties. His face was sad. The white polo shirt and white jeans gave off a heavenly glow.

"Michael!" Saul hurried to shake the man's outstretched hand.

When the two broke apart, they turned to face Aaron, who watched in dismay.

"What's going on here? Who are you?" he asked as he pointed to Michael.

"Michael. I know this is highly unusual, but I thought I would give you one last chance. Aaron, this is your final opportunity to make restitution for your sins before your judgment."

Aaron swiveled his head between the two men. He chuckled as he swung his legs off the table onto the floor.

"You're as crazy as this mother," replied Aaron. "I finally made a name for myself on the streets, and you want me to take it all back! Hell, no!" The young man looked at his frail torso that was once ripped and toned. His head, that used to be filled with thick blond hair, is now shaven down to the skin. Instead of the ripe age of twenty-two, he looked more like fifty-two.

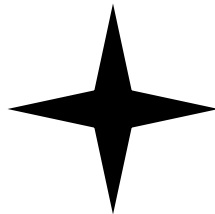
"You don't take your body with you, Aaron. In fact, the only thing that you carry to the afterlife is your soul," said Michael. As he gave Saul a two-finger salute, he vanished within a wisp of smoke.

Aaron, too consumed by his deteriorated appearance, did not notice it was just the two of them.

"Aaron, it seems you made your choice for your eternal destiny. You can leave anytime now." Saul stood back.

The selfish, evil man heard only the word "leave" and moved quickly to the door. But before he opened it, he glanced back over his shoulder at Saul.

"This was one crazy ass dream. See you on the flipside, brother. You won't ever forget me." And as the murderer stepped through to the other side, Saul could hear the cries of agony from the endless miles of eternal damnation.



Derek McMillan is a writer in Durrington in the UK. His editor is his wife, Angela. He has written for print and online publications in the UK, USA and Canada. His latest book is the audio-book with the cheery title "Murder From Beyond the Grave" which is available on eBay. Check it out.

A Trick in Time by Derek McMillan ©

"I think we were lucky."

I looked up from my hospital bed where I seemed to be attached to a dozen tubes and an equal number of drains. I hoped the irony wouldn't be lost on my brother.

It was.

"We were very lucky," he added as if the adverb would make it truer in some mysterious way.

I tried to talk. My voice came out (how can I put it?) wrong. It wasn't my voice. Not only was I trapped in a hospital bed I was apparently trapped with the voice of a stranger and the conviction that I was going insane.

"Explain," was all I managed to say.

He sat down and looked didactic. It was a look calculated to cause irritation and his calculation was correct.

“Good,” he said, “now you are irritated with me rather than sorry for yourself.”

I essayed a smile, well, a bit of one.

“You know, the internet is a wonderful thing but you don’t yet appreciate how wonderful it is. I found out one night, it must be about a year ago now, that I could send a message to the other side of the world.”

“We all knew that,” I tried to say. It didn’t come out like that. He seemed to understand though. He is a very understanding brother.

“Except that this one was different. The time in the Atlantic Standard Zone was 10.39. The time here was 15.40.”

“Just a minute,” I said.

“Exactly. The message arrived exactly a minute before it was sent.”

All kinds of things went through my brain and I must have passed out for a while because when I opened my eyes there was a worried-looking nurse taking my blood pressure.

As if there were no hiatus, Gregor continued.

“Since then I have experimented. You will admit it was a fascinating phenomenon. You know you can access the internet of the past through the “way back machine” but nobody knew it was possible – until my article in Nature that is – that you could send messages back in time. I also think you can communicate with the internet of the future if you have a powerful enough computer.”

Gregor looked smug, although in his case it was hard to tell.

“Do you know how they allocate doctors to operations in this hospital?” he asked.

He didn’t wait for a reply. I had been in a coma for at least a month so I probably didn’t know. “The message goes out via text to call in the surgeon to perform the operation. I can only describe the one who operated on you as an incompetent swine. Well, I would but I have too much respect for pigs.

“If he had been half-way competent you would have lived,” he added.

My look suggested to him that it would be a good idea to repeat what he had just said.

“Oh yes, Dennis, you died under the knife as the expression goes. You couldn’t expect me to do nothing about it, could you? What I did was rather clever but you can thank me later. I sent out a text message cancelling his attendance in theatre that day. I think he is complaining to the hospital management about it as we speak. I picked another surgeon. I chose one who could keep you alive and he performed the operation. They tell me it was reasonably successful.”

I drifted into unconsciousness again. I did that a lot.

When I woke up, I saw a face I thought I knew.

“Darling,” she said.

Obviously, it was somebody I knew quite well. A nurse later remarked that I must have been pleased to see my wife so I won’t keep you in suspense about her identity.

“I am very pleased to see you,” I said.

“And I am pleased to see you, but your voice, it sounds really strange. I hope it gets back to normal soon.”

She crossed her legs.

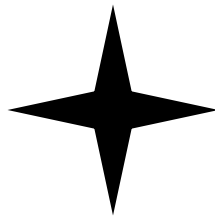
“You were talking in your sleep. Who is Gregor? Should I be jealous?” she smiled.

“Gregor? My brother, Gregor.”

“Dennis, you don’t have a brother, you know. It must be another of those awful dreams.”

“Of course,” I said.

I have never told anybody about Gregor. He died in hospital when I was five and he was two years old. I am still haunted by the fact I could do nothing to help him.



Steve Lodge is a wandering minstrel from London, now based in Singapore. He has written short stories and poems, plays/skits for theatre groups and also lyrics for a band he shouts in. He does stand up comedy, improv, and some acting.

My Auntie Reen, A Cockney Queen. By Steve Lodge ©

I wasn't the only one, I'll tell you that for nothing. All me mates had one too. Mum's best friend. Lived in the same street or block. Sometimes next door. Mine was Auntie Reen. A couple of me mates had an Auntie Reen that was a right stunner, a real vision of loveliness, but most of us had the more traditional Auntie Reen. You know the type, heavy smokers, a hint of a moustache, perhaps one thumb and definitely varicose veins.

Auntie Reen had a heart of gold. She always had her front door open and the kettle on and people would pop up for a chat and a cup even though her tea could rot concrete. Some of her homemade cakes had a suggestion of concrete about them too, bless her.

Auntie Reen lived next door to us on the 4th Floor. We never needed an alarm clock because she'd wake us up with the sound of her coughing after her first cigarette of the day.

We used to like it when Mum was out at work and we went in to see Auntie Reen after school. She'd give us sweets and comics. I even had my first whisky there when she wasn't looking. Yeah, I coughed and gagged and was sick as a dog. A rite of passage, innit?

The only thing we could have lived without, truthfully, was her greeting kiss. She looked a bit cadaverous as she loomed in for that kiss, and her laugh was a bit of a cackle. "Hello, my little darling," she'd say. She kissed like a donkey chewing an apple and there was always toast crumbs in her hint of a moustache. But we thought she was wonderful. Our dear Auntie Reen.

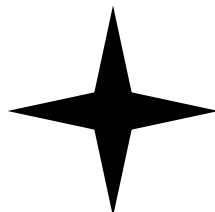
Times were tough back then. I know Auntie Reen helped Mum to put food on our table after Dad had to leg it to Spain. When Mum was at work, Auntie Reen would always come to the school to watch us play football or cricket and encourage me and Mickey.

It was her that got an old drum kit for Mickey from a friend of hers, who she just called Laughter.

In our late teens, it was Laughter who drove us to the Community Centre where our band had a monthly gig because Laughter had a car. He was the only geezer we knew in the whole estate that had a car. He was like a sixth member of our band. When we were old enough, he got us a weekly gig at The Telltale Heart pub down near the docks. It was rough in there but Laughter looked after us. His motto was "Never go anywhere without Laughter."

When Auntie Reen passed away, I've never seen so many people from the estate out in the rain to pay their last respects. We were all in bits. I know I cried all day. So did Mum and Mickey and Laughter.

My dear Auntie Reen was a real Cockney Queen.



Abdullah Aljumah is bilingual. He received his Master's degree in Linguistics from Eastern Michigan University. Many of his short stories are published by various literary reviews and journals, chief among them are published by Melbourne University Grattan Street Press, Akron University Rubbertop Review, Running Wild Press, among many others."

From Bitter to Blessed by Abdullah Aljumah ©

Dedicated to the innocent children, women and men perished in war crimes.

It never crossed his mind that a black cup of coffee would eventually become a glimmer of hope. In the serenity of a cold morning, as he sat alone sipping his coffee, the bitter brew mirrored the dreadful news on his phone — a tapestry of war woven by the hands of the oppressors: crimes, oppression, and relentless disappointment.

He sat staring at his dark beverage. It's such a blessing, often enjoyed by many in this world, but the thought had suddenly transformed. His coffee hid within its darkness the pain of disintegrating families, the ache of lost homes, and the hunger of those who had nothing left on them but ragged clothes, skin and bones. He grappled with the stark reality — such an ironically parallel world. His bitterness swirled like the steam rising from his cup.

In front of the rubbles of a demolished home, a woman cradled her emaciated infant. Beside her, a malnourished, stray cat meowed — a feline as hungry as the souls captured in the images he scrolled through. The desperate creature prowled, scavenging for sustenance among the garbage. How cruel fate could have been that it had been born into a place where hunger was currency, where chasing that cat could have become a desperate urge for survival. A deadly pale old man, his eyes protruding with a spirit greater than his strength, celebrated some meager provisions as if they were treasures — merely coffee beans, sugar, pasta, and flour. "Oh Arabs," the man had exclaimed with joy, "my neighbors can't even find a loaf of bread." Vignettes of famine and annihilation. Those video clips and many more, like divine warnings, etched themselves into his consciousness, conjuring his faculty as a human being before his moral ethics.

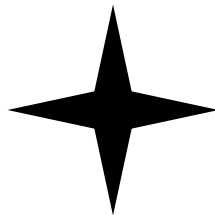
He closed his eyes, meditating. He pictured a tableau wrestling with contradictions: silk-clad sleepers in distant lands exchanged for shaggy children clawing at garbage cans. Perhaps they could find a morsel of stale bread or that cat, cursed by circumstance, could've become their prey and sustenance. Whatever would momentarily satiate their hunger would be a fleeting eternity.

Feeling the weight of humanity's collective conscience, he leaned on his swivel chair and wondered. "Did the rulers of this world comprehend the cost of expanding their dominion?" "Did they see, as he did, the souls rising like steam from his coffee cup?" He cursed them silently as he refilled his cup, adding a generous splash of whiskey — an ancient, alchemical blend of bitterness and appreciation.

His spiced coffee — now more than a warm comfort — carried tragic stories, whispered words of the oppressed, and wailed the sacrifice of that stray cat. For the communion of suffering and resilience, he drank it, vowing to remember, to honor the forgotten, and to amplify their

silent voices. For in that cup, bitter and blessed, lays the quintessence of shared humanity — a fragile equilibrium between despair and hope.

He just sat there, a witness to the world's bitter brew, wondering if someday the scales would tip towards sympathy, or somehow the tide would turn towards compassion. "One day, perhaps, a cup of strongly spiced coffee could be a catalyst for change," he concluded.



Josh Rice is a writer based in Tewkesbury, where he writes from an outhouse at the end of his garden. His short fiction has appeared in publications including *All Your Stories* and *Story Glory*, and his story *Pacificus* won Underdog Authors' May 2026 publishing competition. He also writes middle-grade fiction inspired by—and often for—his daughter.

Skipping Stones by Josh Rice ©

Teardrop-shaped, flat, heavy like a tennis ball. I get to the beach early to dig through the rock pools for the best stones, filling my pockets before a test throw. Surrounded by chalk cliffs and golden sand, I close my eyes and breathe in the salty air.

Four.

"Find some, Daddy?"

"Would I let you down?" I hold out the smallest stones, letting Evie take her pick. She takes two, sliding a smooth, rounded stone into her pocket, while tossing another in the air. Her small hands make the stones look twice as big.

"Remember how I showed you?" Evie lets the waves wash over her toes, leans back, and hurls her stone to the bottom of the sea.

"That wasn't a skip!"

"Was too!"

Ten.

Evie collects her own stones, racing me to the rock pools and back. She always picks stones like crushed cans. Round and light, too light.

"You're so losing today." After years of practice, her form is perfect. Legs bent at the knees, swinging from the hip, arm thrown forward like a whip. She skims her stone perfectly.

"Count that properly!" She shouts, not taking her eyes off the bouncing stone.

"Three!"

"Liar!"

Fifteen.

"What do you think of these?"

"Yeah, great," Evie mumbles, still typing away at her phone. Seagulls squawk overhead, swooping low, looking for something lost. The salty air stings my eyes until I rub at them.

"Want me to go first?"

She doesn't reply, fingers typing at speed. I pull the worst stone I can from my pocket. The stone makes a loud splash as it sinks without a single skip.

"You can beat that easily!" A car beeps from the grassy verge.

"Bye, Dad!"

Twenty-One. You find less and less stones in the rock pools these days, but I managed to find two. We sit in silence, sipping at scolding coffee from paper cups. The stones feel heavy in my pocket.

"Sorry I stopped calling so much," Evie says, watching the crashing waves.

"I get it, can't be easy losing to your old man every time."

"Losing? Did you hit your head or something? Give me a stone, come on, I know you have some."

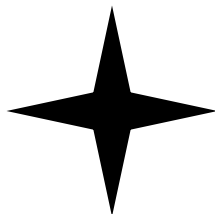
I pull the two stones from my pocket. Evie picks the more rounded of the two, as always. We throw at the same time, she beats me again. She always beats me.

"Hah, five, you'll never beat that!"

Thirty. There's only one stone left. I reach into my coat and find the rounded pebble. Sea spray clings to the stone, making it shine. Evie's lucky stone feels cold in my hand. I shiver and let the memories wash over me as the sun sinks beyond the waves.

"What do you say, Evie, one last game?" I throw, watching the stone soar, giving it a throw Evie would be proud of. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six.

"Liar!" I imagine her saying.



After retirement, **Sara Etgen-Baker** began pursuing her writing dreams. She's written a collection of memoir vignettes, a collection of poems, and a novel. Her writing has appeared in both online and print publications including *Good Old Days Magazine*, various *Guidepost's* magazines and books, and *Chicken Soup for the Soul*.

Enough by Sara Etgen-Baker ©

Dot sat in the coffee shop booth stabbing her pen into her notebook so hard that the tip snapped in two. Ink bled across the page like a tiny crime scene. Around her, espresso machines hissed, and the younger college students murmured about deadlines. Dot didn't hear any of it, though; she just sat there tightening her jaw hard enough to crack a walnut.

Across the table, her friend Liam slid a fresh napkin toward her without looking up from his laptop. "Third one this week," he said. "You're murdering office supplies at an alarming rate."

Dot exhaled through her nose, slowly and deliberately. The crumpled pages in front of her were a graveyard of half-finished sentences—each one crossed out with enough force to tear the paper. "I can't make it *sound* right," her voice husky with tears. "It's like my brain's stuck in traffic."

Liam finally glanced up, pushing his glasses higher on his nose. "Maybe stop trying to write like someone else." He quickly tapped a string of keystrokes, then spun the screen toward her. A single paragraph glowed back at her—simple, direct, unmistakably *his*. No frills, no embellishments.

Dot stared at it. Somewhere in the café, a blender roared to life, and for the first time in hours, she noticed the smell of burnt sugar clinging to the air.

"You're overcomplicating it," Liam said, closing the laptop with a snap. "Good writing isn't about stacking fancy words together like Jenga blocks. It's about—"

"—saying what you mean,"

Dot rubbed her temple, the broken pen leaving a smear of blue on her forehead and fingers. Outside the window, a guy in a wrinkled suit sprinted past, his tie flapping over his shoulder like a manacle dog's tail making her chuckle.

Liam leaned back, arms crossed. "So? What's *your* point?"

Dot stared at her notebook, the scribbles and scratch outs taunting her. She flipped to a fresh page. Her fingers paused, a realization slowly emerging from her subconscious. *'Perhaps the blank space isn't my enemy...perhaps my expectations are.* She exhaled sharply, pressing the heel of her hand against her forehead. "Every damn time," she said blinking back the tears. "I hear my professor's voice: *Elevate your prose!* As if complexity equals quality."

"That explains the thesaurus vomit on page twelve." A teasing smile crossed Liam's face.

A glimmer of laughter came into Dot's eyes. In the background, she heard the blender kick on again, vibrating through the table mimicking the noise inside her head, the relentless static of second guessing.

Her pen hovered. Then, with deliberate slowness, she wrote: *The coffee tasted burnt.*

No metaphors. No lyrical waxing about acrid undertones or the melancholy of stale beans. Just the truth, ugly and plain.

"See! There you go." Liam exclaimed, with satisfaction in his voice.

Something loosened in Dot's chest. She kept writing—short, declarative sentences, each one scraping off another layer of pretense. The words weren't pretty, but they moved across the page. They were her writing voice surfacing from the fathoms of her own self-doubt.

"Bet your professor wouldn't approve," Liam responded with a mutinous look on his face.

"Good!" She scratched out a line, then rewrote it even simpler. The notebook no longer felt like a battleground.

A barista slammed a tray down nearby, sending a ripple through her coffee. The liquid trembled, catching the sunlight. For once, Dot didn't reach for some poetic comparison. She just watched it settle.

Liam stretched, cracking his knuckles. "Next lesson: Kill your Darlings."

She groaned. "Kill your—what?*"

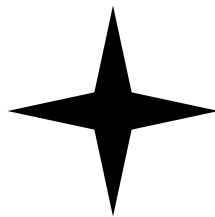
"You know, all those catchy and clever words that you think are just so creative and 'darling.' If your words don't serve the story, stab them." He mimed a dagger thrust into his chest.

Dot rolled her eyes at him but didn't stop writing. The sentences piled up—raw, unpolished, *alive*. Outside, the guy with the flapping tie had circled back, now panting as he dropped coins into the parking meter.

Her pen stilled. "What if it's not *enough*?"

Liam shrugged. "Then you edit. But first, you have to let the story exist."

Dot stared at the page. The words stared back, unapologetic. For the first time in weeks, she didn't want to set them on fire.



Guidelines 2026

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2026

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