

Another Dose of
Verbal Remedies

Creative Writing by Medical Students



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Selected and edited by Helen Lynch

In memoriam
Dr Jeannie MacLeod (1874-1902)



My great aunt Jeannie MacLeod was an outstanding medical student and one of the first women to qualify as a doctor in Scotland. Because she was a woman, she could not be admitted to the University of Aberdeen without first undertaking a Ladies' Licentiate in the Arts at St Andrew's. Once on the medical course, she worked hard and won many prizes, but she was particularly proud to have been awarded the Lizars' Gold Medal in practical anatomy. She was president of the newly formed Women's Medical Society and also contributed to university discussions on arts and literature. As the only woman in her year, she was jeered at and resented by a significant number of the men. Overcoming considerable prejudice, she qualified in

April 1902 with glowing references from all her teachers. My colleague Dr Clare Gerada has written about what happened next:

On Monday 28th April 1902 Dr Jeannie MacLeod buttoned her clean starched white coat, checked her pockets for her stethoscope and note book, took one last look at herself in the mirror and walked onto the paediatric ward as the new house officer at Aberdeen Children's hospital. She glowed with pride as she introduced herself to the senior ward matron, for the first time able to use the title, Doctor. By the end of that week Jeannie was dead. At the age of 28 and alone in her on-call room she cut her jugular vein and bled to death before being found by the porter sent from the ward to find her.¹

Jeannie did not leave a suicide note and we do not know for sure why she killed herself. There was no history of mental illness and none of her family and friends could make sense of her death. In press reports, long hours and overwork were blamed. Her parents were told of a child on the ward who had died for whom Jeannie felt responsible.

In their work, doctors witness considerable suffering and are often faced with the futility of their efforts¹. The NHS pays lip service to a no-blame culture, but the reality is sometimes different. Importantly, doctors are often the first to blame themselves when things go badly. This is particularly painful for those who have been selected for academic excellence in science, who often have perfectionist tendencies. Support systems and clinical supervision are clearly essential, but I believe that the medical humanities also have a powerful role to play in deepening our understanding of ourselves and others. I am therefore delighted to sponsor this edition of *Verbal Remedies* to honour the memory of Dr Jeannie MacLeod.

Dr Robert Clarke

FRCB, FRCGP, Medical Educator and previously Associate Dean, London Deanery

¹Gerada, C (2018) Doctors and Suicide. *British Journal of General Practice*; 68: 168

Foreword

During the six week Medical Humanities block, all Aberdeen third year medical students take time to consider health, illness and healthcare from an alternative perspective offered by a range of arts and humanities subjects. The arts help us to make sense of the world, our experiences and emotions. The poignant and tragic story of Jeannie MacLeod is important to share in order to highlight the vulnerability of young practitioners. Medical Humanities can have a role connecting, expressing and developing resilient, compassionate practitioners.

The students who undertake our Creative Writing for Medics course are challenged by this unfamiliar medium but they find the course very rewarding and some even cathartic. I hope you find reading their work an inspiration.

We are grateful for the generosity of Jeannie's family in supporting this publication and our and the students' endeavours in Medical Humanities.

Dr Leanne Bodkin

Coordinator Medical Humanities SSC

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Haiku

Jessica Wheeler

Serenely they glide,
Black swans mirrored in the lake,
They swim amongst stars.

Awkward Journey

John Scott

Tarquin and I had just finished rugby training and were walking towards his mother's car. She had come to pick both of us up because I was going back to theirs for dinner. It had rained all day. It was the kind of day that after you got tackled to the ground, the mud would get right up your nostrils and into your sinuses.

Out of respect to Tarquin's mum I had done my best to knock the biggest chunks off my legs and had taken the time to change back into my school uniform. Tarquin was still in his mud-caked kit. He was strolling ahead of me in his shorts and the muck had begun to dry on his legs. With every step and flex of his muscles, I'd noticed, it was cracking and flaking off, forming ridges that accentuated his calves. He had developed a little sooner than the rest of us, an intimidating presence on the field and a fine specimen for girls to ogle at.

Tarquin went around the car to get into the front seat. He trailed his hand over the paintwork as he went, leaving a long streak of brown along its gleaming white side. I opened the door behind the driver's seat. His mother, Meredith, had wisely draped a towel across it. I tried my best to sit on it carefully to avoid besmirching the leather upholstery. Barely glancing behind him, Tarquin threw his sports bag into the back seat beside me. An arc of dirt flew out, some of it ending up in my mouth and the rest pattering over the leather, miraculously managing to land precisely where the towel wasn't covering. The mud tasted bitter in my mouth. I spat it out into my hand and surreptitiously wiped it onto the side of his bag.

His mum turned around to look at the mess, "Oh never mind." But something in her face told me she did mind, at least a little.

As we set off, she turned the radio down to ask, "How did it go then, did either of you score any goals?"

Tarquin squirmed in response to her attempts to start conversation. I never understood why he acted so awkward around his mum, she seemed pretty down to earth and was usually chatty. "How many times do I need to tell you in rugby they're tries, not goals."

"Ooo, okay then, Mister. Well how many tries did you score today then?"

"None. You know I'm a forward, Mum, we don't score the tries. And don't be so patronising." I chipped in "Well, I scored a couple."

"Good for you!" she said, clearly relieved to be away from the scrutiny of her son.

"You are such a little arse licker," Tarquin responded, turning around and punching my leg.

"What did I tell you about using language like that?"

"Not this again."

"You're just showing off because your little friend is here, aren't you?"

Tarquin did not reply.

Meredith sighed and turned the radio back up again and we spent the rest of the journey back to their house without any further chat. Fortunately, it was not long before we were crunching up the gravel driveway and had parked in front of their garage. As we walked up towards the house

the silence was broken by Tarquin.

“What’s for dinner then?” His hunger had clearly overtaken his disdain for his mother.

“You’ll find out after your shower. Get a towel out of the cupboard for Stephen, won’t you?”

“Yeah, yeah. You better have got us one of those chocolate yoghurts for afters.”

She opened the door and stood back as he barged ahead of her into the house. She sighed and motioned for me to go in ahead as well.

“Thank you,” I said, following her son through the door.

We went through the house and into his bedroom. He turned on the TV and motioned for me to sit on his unmade bed, then went to get the first shower. I flicked through the channels but couldn’t find anything decent to watch so decided to take a look around his room instead. It was tidier than mine, but their family had a cleaner so that didn’t count. On one wall, he had a poster of a bikini clad woman standing coquettishly astride a motorbike, her swimwear matching the red bodywork. I never understood why guys had these kinds of posters up in their room. And why would you wear high heels when riding a bike anyway? There was a chest of drawers in the corner of the room which had a couple of bottles of aftershave on top of it. I walked over to open one of the drawers, revealing some of the stylish T-shirts that always seemed to fit him so well. The smell of fresh laundry intermingled with cologne wafted out. That explained why he always smelled so good. It was then I heard the shower stop, so quickly closed the drawer and went back to sit on his bed.

Tarquin came back in wearing only boxer shorts and holding his wet towel which he proceeded to throw on the ground. I couldn’t help but stare in awe at his physique. Sure, he was a bit skinny, but he had a six pack and not an inch of fat on him and I could only feel inadequate in his presence.

“Get off my bed, you greasy bastard, and get a shower,” he said, moving across the room to get one of the T-shirts out of the drawer. “Left a towel in the bathroom for you.”

On my way down the corridor I nearly tripped over the sports gear that he had strewn across the hallway leading up to the bathroom. I noticed that the pair of boxers that he had been playing in was peeking out from under his rugby top. I looked quickly up and down the corridor and then without a further thought I flicked them out and raised them to my face. Yes, there it was, underneath the scent of grass and mud, that amazing smell he always had about him. But there was more than that, a sweaty musk which gave me an inexplicable flutter in my stomach.

I heard a door open behind me.

“Dinner is read...” Meredith stopped midway through the door.

There was complete silence, interrupted only by the sound of the boxers hitting the hardwood floor. My eyes pleaded with her. Do not say anything. Do not let anyone know what just happened. You can’t. You mustn’t.

Tarquin appeared out of his bedroom door, fully dressed and ready to eat. He had instantly picked up on the tension between Meredith and me.

“What the fuck is going on?”

He moved towards us slowly and as he did so I hoped that he wouldn’t notice that his underwear had moved to the ground beneath my feet. I would never be able to live it down. One moment of impulsivity. This is the kind of event that ruins high school careers. I could already hear the jeers. It would all be over and there was nothing I could do about it.

“You took too long to have a shower and your poor friend Stephen didn’t get a chance to have his before the food was ready, that’s what.” She turned to me: “Go wash your hands, Stephen. You can have a proper shower when we’ve finished eating.”

She beckoned her son towards the door into the kitchen, laying a protective hand on his shoulder as she ushered him past her. She turned her head to give me a small half-frown before following him through.

Nazir Ahmed

Aqsa Zeehan

A thin wisp of smoke floated through the open car window. He opened the door and sat down, my nostrils twitching as scent of tobacco and aftershave filled the car.

“Assalamu alaikum,” the obligatory greeting when meeting an elder was uttered in synchrony by my siblings and me.

“Wa alaikam assalam,” his voice was deep and firm. One you wouldn’t argue with.

My grandfather wore his usual three-piece suit. This particular one was a dark grey, the colour of Glasgow’s sky on this typical rainy day, contrasting with a crisp white shirt. The green tie emphasised the hints of green in his grey eyes. Mum had the same eyes, eyes that changed colour depending on the season. In summer, they would be greener than a rainforest and in winter as dark and grey as Aberdeen granite. As he and Mum continued a conversation I couldn’t be bothered trying to translate mentally and understand, I peered out of the window. It was raining. Obviously it was raining. It wouldn’t be Glasgow if it wasn’t. I saw my grandfather’s reflection in the wing mirror. He looked younger than sixty-five. Although he had deep wrinkles on his forehead and lines around his mouth, he had a sparkle in his eyes and his face glowed whenever he smiled. His teeth were slightly yellow and slightly crooked, with a small gap between the front two. He was always asking for lifts and Mum would always complain. I didn’t mind as much. I enjoyed hearing his stories from back home, or when he worked in a restaurant or when he met Naani. Although I wished I could fluently have a conversation with him in Urdu, I grasped enough to understand the skeleton of every story and backbone of each conversation. He also gave us money every time he saw us: a shiny pound coin, or sometimes a crisp fiver on special occasions. I was saving up for a new Nintendo DS game so had another ten lifts before I would be able to buy it. The car suddenly stopped, snapping me out of my thoughts. We waved our goodbyes as he got out and walked away, his tall figure eventually disappearing into the crowds.

It was just after 5 a.m. This stupid cough had woken me up once again. It felt like someone had rubbed sandpaper along my oesophagus. In search of water to soothe my burning throat, I got up and started making my way to the kitchen. The sun was just beginning to rise so the first light of day shone down through the skylight, casting the hall staircase in an eerie light. Tiptoeing down the stairs, afraid to wake anyone up, I saw a shadow sitting on the bottom steps.

“Mum?”

No answer. I could feel my heart pounding in my chest. I stepped quickly down the remaining stairs.

“Mum?!”

She looked up, a stream of tears running down her cheek. The landline grasped tightly in her hands, knuckles white. I had never seen her cry before. A million bad thoughts ran through my mind.

“What happened?” my voice a quiet whisper.

“Grandad’s in hospital.” Her eyes were a dark cloud, no traces of green. I hated seeing her upset.

Next thing I remember we were rushing to the hospital. Dad stayed at home, with my blissfully unaware, sleeping brother and sister. We were ushered into a waiting room with the rest of my family, the air thick with tension and sadness. Naani sat on a chair in the corner, eyes closed and hands clasped tightly around prayer beads, her mouth moving quickly and silently. I went over and hugged her as hard as I could, trying to take away her sadness with my embrace.

Hours passed, barely anyone spoke. The deadly silence interrupted only by my coughs and the tick tock of the clock. Tick tock, tick tock. Cough. Tick tock, tick tock. Cough.

After what felt like a century, a doctor came in. My mum and aunt stood up and went to speak to him outside. The clock seemed to tick louder, or maybe it was the sound of my own heart beating hard against my ribs. Another decade passed before they came back in. I could tell from the look on Mum's face it wasn't good news.

The Dragon *Julia Thomas*

Wide-eyed, she stares – a skeleton
Bruised, thin skin covers her – barely
White hair – a helmet, no – a cloud.
'The doctor is here' earns her focus
And I ask my routine questions.
But answers lead to shadowed paths
And to a dark and secret cave.
So soon? I'm surprised to enter
Naked there she stands. So I feel
An intruder, I want to run.
She shows me bruises, wounds – given
And tells me of treasures – taken
By the cave's dragon she's forced to trust.
A broken system, a carer's
Evil, or her own dementia
Which one delivered the dragon?

Spring Cleaning *Elizabeth Miller*

"Your grandma and I used to garden all the time," a voice cuts into my reverie. I've been occupied with deadheading flowers for the last half hour, while my grandfather plants bulbs. In one gloved hand, I'm holding a binbag full of dried flowerheads.

"Really?" I say. In his head he holds a thousand stories I've never heard, and it's rare for him to open up like this. I can hardly picture my grandmother gardening.

"We actually met in the gardens, when I was studying Biology at University," he continues. I move to a new bush, not turning to face him. His stories often come out slowly and steadily. Neither of us is good at sitting still and talking, so I've learned to listen carefully and remember. Who will if I don't? I hear the rustle of the dry skins of the bulbs against the plastic bag as he takes a breath before continuing, "She was touring the greenhouse with her friends and I was working there."

"You studied at the same university, right?" I query, fairly sure they did.

"Yes, she studied English. I remember she came up to me and asked me what created the beautiful scent in the greenhouse."

I smile at the clematis – I wouldn't expect anything else. She was always the confident one, terrorising family dinners. My mother hated her. "What was it?" I ask, slowing my work, trying to

delay asking for a new job so as not to distract him from his tale.

“Geraniums,” he says, wistful, and falls quiet. The garden is silent apart from the sound of birdsong, the muffled shouts of children across the street and the snip of my secateurs. A leaf floats down to my feet. I wait, to see if he’ll volunteer more, bag filling with flowerheads. When he doesn’t, I turn around.

“What kind of geraniums were they?”

He takes a second to pull a new bulb from the bucket beside him, lift some dirt and bury it beneath. In spring, this garden will be alive with tulips. “I don’t know. I’d love to know.”

“What scent?”

“Rose.” And then, a beat later: “She thought they were ugly-looking, but she loved the smell.”

His turn to smile now, I see it creasing the wrinkles and lines of his face. She was a difficult woman, my grandma, but the people who loved her loved her wholeheartedly. We both know that. I empty my bag of flowerheads and twigs onto the compost heap, and when look towards my grandfather again he hands me a trowel. For a second, I think I’m being trusted to plant the bulbs beside him.

“Dig up some of the weeds for me, will you?” It’s a close second, as far as having my grandfather’s trust goes, being considered knowledgeable enough to know what’s a weed and what isn’t.

“OK,” I reply, getting to work on some dandelions. He doesn’t use pesticides if he can help it. I wonder if he can still do this, with his increasingly arthritic hands. “What happened after that?” I’ve found an angle that lets me attack the weed and pull it from the ground. I need to remove the whole root, or it will come back in Spring.

“After what?”

“After she came over to talk to you?”

“We talked for hours, and we found out we were taking the same bus home, so we decided to take it together.”

The root, long and twisted, finally gives and I pull it from the ground. I move to the next.

“And then, she disappeared all of a sudden. I didn’t see her again until the bus stop – she almost missed it, she had to run.” I pause my digging, re-engaging with the tale. I had thought he was done talking. It’s rare to get this many words from him.

“Really? Why?”

“You’ll never guess.” Mirth has entered his voice now. He used to teach classes at a school before I was born, and he still seems to appreciate having people’s attention.

“I don’t know, you’ll have to tell me,” I say. I’m truly unable to guess – with my grandma it could have been anything from paragliding to returning a book to the library.

“She wouldn’t tell me, at the time. I asked and asked. She only told me after we were married.”

“What was it?” The second dandelion loosens.

“She went to buy sweets, and she was so embarrassed she didn’t show me them. Just as well, I probably would have robbed her blind.”

I throw the second root in the bin, chuckling just loud enough to hear. We return to silence for a spell as I pull all the weeds from the ground, leaving it looking like small bombs have gone off across the beds. I tamp down the earth where I’ve disturbed it. I wonder if my grandfather feels as melancholic as I do. Talking about my grandma always makes us this way. We miss her.

“What did she do in the garden?” I say the question out loud a few seconds after it comes to my mind.

“I was wondering when you’d ask,” he says. “Come to the greenhouse.”

It’s a short walk. I push myself to my feet and wait for him to overcome the creaking in his joints and stand. He walks ahead of me into the small glass structure at the back of the garden, shrouded by bushes, and opens the door with a creak.

“Here,” he says, picking up a small plastic pot, out of which peeks a stem surrounded by bright green, rounded leaves. It’s not the fanciest there; it’s surrounded by rich purple succulents, giant ball cacti and the regal jewel tones of begonias. “She grew these.”

“Is this a geranium?” I ask. Other questions sit at the back of my mind, but I force myself to ask one at a time.

“Yes,” he says. “I took a cutting for her, all those years ago, and gave it to her. She kept worrying she’d killed it, so I had to teach her how to look after it.”

“I thought you didn’t know what type of geranium it was.”

“I don’t, I only took a cutting, I never learned the name. This is a cutting of the cuttings of the original.” He looks for a second like he’s about to jump into a full-blown biology lesson, teach me all about clones.

I breathe in its heady scent. The scent inadvertently responsible for my whole existence. A sense of déjà vu washes over me, and I realise this scent used to surround me when I visited my grandparents. “I thought she thought it was ugly.”

“Ugly flower, beautiful scent. She grew them for the scent– it fills a whole room when they get big enough. You should have it,” he says, and I can detect a hint of sadness in his voice. “For your flat.”

“OK.” I say, with a smile. Then, like my grandmother taught me: “Thank you very much for the gift.” I realise then that it’s the only geranium in the greenhouse, this tiny thing. There are no more. I don’t ask him why.

“Now,” he says. “Come and plant bulbs with me.”

Opening for a New Assistant

Emma Gray

‘Are you holding on tightly?’

‘Yes, Mr White,’

‘Just call me Dave, we’re going to get to know each other pretty well if you work here! First day?’

‘No, I started a couple of weeks ago but this is my first time doing this. Is my grip correct?’

‘Yes yes that’s fine, Eric,’

‘It’s ah...Scott, my name’s Scott,’

‘Ah yes, sorry, Scott... Now you just let me know if your arms get tired at any point and you feel like you can’t hold on any more.’

‘Okay, Dave. Can I ask by the way, are you really going to stick your hand in there?’

‘Absolutely, I don’t know how else we’re going to get it out.’

‘Is it far in?’

‘Oh yes, right at the back.’

‘What if it closes when your hand is in?’

‘Then I might just lose a hand, Scott, but that won’t happen. It’s sound asleep, look its eyes are shut, no movement. These things are wriggly little bastards when they are awake. Still got a firm grip?’

‘Yes, Dave, are you sure it’s asleep, I think I saw its tail twitch...’

‘It’s fine to be nervous, but trust me I’ve been working on these animals for years. This thing is completely sedated. The odd twitch is perfectly natural, steady now – hold that mouth nice and open.’

‘God, those are big pliers,’

‘Big pliers for big teeth, Scott!’

‘Ummm, I think it’s resisting my grip...I think it’s trying to shut its mouth, Mr.... I’m really not sure it’s properly sedated...’

‘Nonsense, keep holding steady now, I have the tooth!’

‘No...really...it’s definitely awake! I think it’s tasting my fingers with its tongue!’

‘You need a stern nerve to work with big animals Scott and I know crocodiles have a terrible reputation, but please calm down. I don’t want you to end up like the last assistant.’

‘Wait... what happened to last assistant!?’

‘Never mind, Eric...sorry Scott was it? Ah what’s that now? Oh God, I think he might be awake!’

Eilean Iarmain

Jed Smith

The man walked down through the trees. A few steps behind him the woman followed, stumbling over branches torn from trees by the storm the night before. They emerged out of the wood onto a windswept beach covered with loose pieces of seaweed scattered from the storm, with residual waves from the loch sending watery fingers high up the sand. The cloudy sky had turned the surface of the water a dull grey, while the white horses gave it the appearance of bubbling, molten silver. In front of them, on the other side of the loch, mountains rose steeply from the water’s edge. The threat of rain was thick in the air.

“Well, here we are. What do you think?” the man asked, turning towards the woman standing just behind him.

“Yeah, it’s beautiful. Couldn’t we have waited until the weather was better though?”

“I’ve just been desperate to take you here for ages. Did I tell you I once saw a minke whale here whilst fishing with my Dad?” The man pointed to the left, just beyond the peninsula sharply sticking out into the loch. At the end of the peninsula, a solitary white lighthouse could be made out, a green dinghy anchored just off the point. “The way to spot one is actually to look for birds on the surface of the water close into the shoreline. They can see the fish underneath and it’s much easier to spot the birds than to look out for fins in the water. Especially when the water’s choppy like it is today.”

“I wish you’d warned me to wear better shoes though, my feet are completely soaked.” The woman was looking down, her red shoes now brown from damp and mud.

“Sorry, I completely forgot how boggy it gets on the way down.”

“So, what do we do now that we’re here?”

“Anything really: walk around, get some fresh air, or just enjoy the scenery. We could maybe look for some oysters, you can find them around here you know. That sounds nice, doesn’t it? Hand-picked oysters for dinner.”

The man sat down on the sand. The woman walked a bit further along the beach before sitting down as well. She picked up some broken shells and started playing absent-mindedly with them.

“Look at the mist on the mountains over there,” he said, pointing across the loch. “The five peaks in the middle are called the Five Sisters of Kintail. You know, it’s funny, when tourists visit, they’re always disappointed if the weather’s like this, but I think it makes everything more atmospheric.”

In front of the man a crab emerged cautiously from of a piece of seaweed debris pushed high up the beach. He watched as it scuttled towards the water, pausing to take shelter under rocks and seaweed on the way.

“Hello?”

The woman turned towards the man, her eyes refocusing. “Hey, sorry. I was just thinking.”

“You never really answered me before. What do you think of this place?”

“I guess I was just expecting more, considering how much you spoke about it.”

“I should’ve figured that.”

“What do you mean?”

The man picked up a stalk of seaweed that was lying partially covered by sand beside him. Individually he picked off the mussels attached to it, chucking them down the beach without much conviction. Once he had picked the stalk clean he threw that as well before turning back to the woman.

“I just think this place makes me appreciate what a great country Scotland is. I mean, people come from all over the world to visit. Instead of wanting to see what’s on the other side of the mountains this place reminds me to appreciate what I’ve got.”

“What’s wrong with wanting to see what’s on the other side of the mountains?”

“It’s like thinking the grass is always greener on the other side.”

“If nobody explored over the mountains though, there’d be no progress. Everyone here would still be living in little stone houses and crofting.”

He looked across the loch at the mountains. The grey clouds behind the Five Sisters had been replaced by a band of approaching darkness. He strained his hardest to try and distinguish the falling rain within its density.

“I wonder how similar Canada looks,” she said to no-one in particular.

“I’ve heard the West Coast looks pretty similar to here. I know some of this rock is from Canada, left behind when the two land masses were connected in the past.”

“Really? I never knew Scotland and Canada used to be joined together.”

The darkness of the rain had moved past the mountain peaks now, obscuring them from view. A squall hit the beach, heralding its approach.

“Have you made up your mind yet?” the man said suddenly.

“You know I haven’t.”

“How am I meant to know that?”

“I wish you’d stop being so snippy all the time.”

“How do you expect me to be?”

“I don’t know, but not like that.”

The man said nothing. He reached into his coat pockets, taking out a pair of gloves. “I just want things to be good again; like they used to be,” he said.

“I do too.”

“What can we do?”

“I don’t know.”

The man stood up and walked down to the edge of the loch. He threw the best skimming stone he could find, watching it get swallowed by the first wave it encountered. Turning back towards the woman he felt the first drops of rain land on his face.

Chipper Dave

Malcolm Sutherland

Aw hello! Davey! How you doin man? C'mon, Davey, wakey wakey!

– Wha, huh, wha?

Davey! Hello! Yep, wakey wakey pal. No, no, don't roll over. You need to wake up so we can have a chat. Davey, I know you can hear me, I just saw you open your eyes so stop pretending and sit up and talk to me. This does get a bit wearing you know Davey, I can't keep doing this. Well, you know what, if you're going to pretend to be unconscious, I'm going to have to just act like you're unconscious and you won't like that. No? Nothing? Sure? Ok then, the hard way it is.

– Ooyah, what the fuck you doin? Get the fuck off me!

Aha, it's alive!

– That was fuckin sair, why the fuck you do that ya miserable bastard?

You know, Davey, you seemed to be unconscious so I had to check – you're alright though, you're alive. Saved your life. Back from the brink. Another couple of minutes and who knows?

– Think you're a funny cunt, eh?

No pal, just concerned.

– Some fuckin way of showin it.

That's not fair, you know how this works. Or, well, doesn't in your case.

– What's that supposed to mean like?

Nothing, I'm just tired, mate.

– Well so wuz ah! Ah wuz just getting a bit o kip, waitin fir ma chips to be ready.

Your chips?

– Aye, ma fuckin chips. Look around ye, why the fuck d'ye think ahm in here?

You're serious? You've been gouchin in the corner of the chippy waiting for your chips? For thirty minutes?

– It's only bin like five minutes, man

Eh, nope, they didn't notice you at first cos it was busy but it's been at least half an hour.

– Fuckin so?

What we gonna do about you, Davey? We can't keep doing this – the Police will end up getting involved and I know you don't want that.

– The polis? I huvn't done anythin wrong, why the fuck you gonna put the polis on me?

That's not what I said and you know why anyway – folk don't like having someone conked out, sorry, sleeping, in their shop. You kinda put people off comin in mate. The staff were worried is all. So am I.

– There's nothing FUCKIN WRONG wi me.

Alright, that's fine, I'll leave you be. Where you heading now?

– Home.

Where's home again, Davey? Up Moredun isn't it? Will there be anyone there?

– Ah don't huvtae give ye ma address.

Nope, you're right, you don't, I was just needing some details for my paperwork, mate.

– You can't have my date o birth either before ye ask.

Ha! You know the drill eh? Just as well I remember from the last time eh?!

– Fuck off.

Gladly, Davey, gladly. See you next time.

My Eightieth Birthday

Julia Thomas

He's booked a restaurant
'Just you and me'
I play the game,
'That sounds nice'
But I've shoes for a dance,
Tape for ulcered feet,
Pills for creaking bones –
I'm ready.
I know we'll stop here.
I feign confusion
'Why are we stopping?'
A ceilidh – I was right
He takes my hand,
Steadies my step
Leading a familiar dance
With a familiar crowd –
The layers of life
They're dressed up now
– dancing together
It's here I belong
– amongst my layers.

Each layer is thinner now
A few missing, here and there
But I'm lucky, I have enough
Layers to still belong.

Grandma's House

Lauren Waliji

Dad has to ring the doorbell three times. We're outside Grandma and Grandad's flat, and they know we're here as Dad buzzed up before we all got the lift three flights up. That's three flights of Dad shouting at us not to touch the walls because they're manky.

Grandma opens the door and shuffles back, saying something to my dad in her language, it always sounds angry when they speak but it's probably just them saying hello. Grandma lets us in and I can see Grandad a little way behind her; Mum always says that they look like the munchkin people because they're so tiny, and they honestly do. I go to hug both of them. I don't want to because it's not nice. I know that none of us want to be here but it's been a while since we've seen them so Dad decided we had to go.

The house smells like one of the foreign food shops we go to at home, and I can see from the hall that something's cooking in the kitchen, the windows are steamed up and something's boiling. I don't feel good about this. Grandma shouts at Grandad and Grandad doesn't hear. Dad says he's deaf but Mum says he should stop switching off his hearing aid. Grandma pushes me and Louis

into the kitchen through the beads in the doorway. I don't know where everyone else has gone. She points at the wooden table wedged between the fridge and the wall. I think she wants us to sit so we do. I know what's going to happen and I look at the doorway hoping that someone will come in. I start to panic.

Grandma says "Hungry" and nods her head like a question. Me and Louis start to mumble that we've eaten but Grandma doesn't quite understand. She sets a big bowl of rice in front of us and another bowl of brown curry – looks like chicken, I'm sure it's the same one she always makes. She gets out bowls and spoons and dishes up.

Me and Louis sit there looking at each other. He should know what to do, he's older, but he looks just as worried. Grandma starts pushing on Louis' shoulder to eat. I say goodbye to my mouth and take a bite of the curry and rice mix. My mouth is on fire, my eyes start to cry, and I wish she'd just made sandwiches.

Mum, Dad, Crispy and Grandad come into the kitchen. I can't really see with the water in my eyes but I know it's all of them. Grandma shouts at Dad in the angry language and he shouts back. She goes to the fridge and pulls out a yoghurt container and mixes it into each of our bowls as the snot runs down my face.

She pushes on me now to try again. I pick up another spoon of it and wonder why she hates us. Now it just tastes of spicy strawberry yoghurt.

The Many Faces of Pain

Cerys Barratt

Emotionless and cold or uncontrollable and erratic
She can be either but never both
Her judgement is murky but she sees clarity,
Colours of vibrant red or blue.
She feels immortal and dominating
That nothing can overcome her.
Some days she is quiet and sits in the duvet
Building her strength to be at full force
Some days she cries and screams
Thinking maybe that will stop it all
In reality
She doesn't want to feel better
Pain is living
Crying is feeling
Screaming is breathing
This is forever
She is infinite.

Please Insert Coin to Continue

Jing Yi Goh

'Wait, wait, what?' I exclaimed. I couldn't believe what I just heard. My right hand was furiously toggling on the joystick, my left fiercely punching between six large, colourful buttons. My eyes squinted even more as a stray glint from the stack of coins beside me pierced them for a moment.

Did I hear that right? The kid beside me, just over half my height, stayed silent, his hands a flurry of activity too. The orange light from the arcade walls bounced off his skin, making it look a shade yellower than it normally was. I wanted to confront him right now, but I couldn't take my eyes off the screen, couldn't afford to. The both of us stared intently at the screen, where our characters were punching and kicking, flashy moves here and there. I made my character emit a blue fireball,

'Tomo, what did you say?'

'I'm leaving, Jeff. I'm not playing anymore'

'WHAT?'

I caught my shout before my voice erupted. No doubt Jack, the owner, fiddling away with his phone at the reception, would have something to say if I actually did. Tomo's character, a yellow-haired guy in a red robe, dodged my fireball flawlessly.

'What do you mean you're not playing anymore?' I whispered as intensely as I could. I grabbed the joystick and punched the buttons harder, as if that would help me play better. Somewhere behind me, a loud 'Psst!' and 'crack' of a can opening. The sweet fizzy scent of artificial grape enveloped the arcade, refreshing its warm, sticky atmosphere.

'I'm not playing anymore, Jeff.' The boy said it coolly. He stood relaxed in front of the arcade machine, not breaking a sweat, unlike me.

'But you just won the first world tournament a week ago!'

Silence again. It would be unfair to say Tomo fought perfectly. No, his character was dancing, waltzing to a deadly tune of victory. The smooth motions of his hands alone were enough to enthrall any unworthy opponent.

'Why, Tomo?' I asked again, softening my voice, almost pleading. He was a genius at this game, a virtuoso. Why this, all of a sudden?

'It's not fun anymore, Jeff.'

I watched my character's health bar melt away under Tomo's impeccable assault. I did not interrupt.

'I remember when I first started this game, what it felt like to win. It was amazing. When I got my first win, I felt, wow, this is incredible.'

I looked over. Light from the screen reflected from Tomo's black eyes, his matching black hair spiky, the way he always styles it. His dark jeans and sneakers almost let him blend into the dim arcade atmosphere, if it hadn't been for his light blue T-shirt basking in the bright screen light, 'Arcade Fire' on it in faded print.

'But not anymore, Jeff. Nowadays, when I win I go, okay, so my mood won't be ruined today. You know what I mean?'

A last barrage of furious clicking and his hands stopped. I looked back to the screen. On my side, in bold capital letters 'YOU LOSE'. My health bar, empty. In the corner of my eye, I saw Tomo gently lift his hands from the controls. He turned them over, seemingly to examine them, but his eyes were far away.

'It doesn't have the same meaning anymore. It's not fun anymore. Jeff, maybe... maybe it's time for me to do something else.' A brief pause, he looked up at me. 'Yeah, I think... I think it's time for something else.'

A sad smile on his face, Tomo turned his back on the arcade machine, 'STREET FIGHTER II' in colourful retro font proudly displayed on top of it. He walked towards the arcade doors, where natural sunlight was peeping in, as if a curious child was poking his head in to see what was going on in the mysterious, neon-lit room.

As he pushed open the doors, I looked back at the screen, at the side that was exclaiming: 'YOU WON'. In the top left corner, the health bar of the red-robed character was fully blue, not even a pixel less. I gave a soft sigh.

My Usual Spot *Rachael Annandale*

I feel so stiff. The chair I'm in is awfully uncomfortable. My back aches too. I've had that for a few days now. I must've slept on it funny. The television is on but the volume is turned right down. I can hardly hear a thing. I'm not really paying attention to the TV though, I'm just waiting for my mother. I wonder where she is, what's taking her so long. I've not seen my mother in quite a while. It'll be nice for her to visit.

I decide to go to the bathroom before she arrives. Standing up is a bit of an effort. I'm weaker than I anticipated. I hope I'm not coming down with something. As I'm walking, my slippers catch my eye. They're an ugly dark green colour. Why on earth did I buy those? I never wear green. I think I'll buy a new pair next time I'm out at the shops.

I return from the bathroom and there is still no sign of my mother. I can't remember what time she said she'd be here but I'm sure she's late now. Maybe I should give her a ring? I look around the room for the phone but I can't see it. Puzzled, I notice it's not in the living room. I've always kept my house phone on the cabinet by the window. I can always go through to the bedroom and use the other phone in there. I shouldn't worry myself, I'll wait another fifteen minutes then go phone her. I sit myself back down in my usual spot.

A young woman walks towards me. She's wearing a light blue overall and pushing a trolley of tea and biscuits. Her face is smiling and familiar. She says "Perfect timing Margaret, I've got your tea here for you. Can you take this for me too? It's just for your aches and pains."

It's a Hard Life Being Great *Brodie Cameron*

It was early morning in downtown New York. The city was just waking up. New York was my kingdom. I looked down on the people like ants from up here in my tower. The people love me. I love me. Everybody loves me, of course. I'm also really rich. I've got a hell of a lot of money. And I'm really fucking good looking. I am one sexy piece of ass.

"Debra, get in here," I said.

"Coming, sir," she said.

"Debra, will you sound a little more enthusiastic, I'm not paying you to float around."

"Sorry, sir."

"Stupid old woman," I muttered.

"I'm sorry?"

"Nothing. Did you sort my appointment with my tailor? I want to look extra sharp."

"Yes I did, sir. 3:30, sir."

“Excellent. That’ll be all for now.”

I looked out the window across the cityscape. My top floor office complex had the best view money could buy in New York. I looked in the mirror. My teeth had just been whitened and my tan was on point. “Damn, I look fucking good.”

I didn’t really want to work today. I’m rich, I can afford to do whatever the fuck I want. I am so great. I walked down the hall and saw Chelsey, the new intern straight out of college. She was a pretty little thing. Girls sure like an older man, don’t they?

“Hey there, pretty girl,” I said as I winked and slapped her ass. To be honest, when you’re this rich you can do whatever you want. She quickly scurried away. She definitely wants a piece of me.

I wanted to play golf before my next speech but time evaded me. As I stepped outside I saw a car that particularly tickled my fancy. “Ma’am is this your vehicle?”

“Yes, why?”

“I’m buying it,” I said, cheque already in hand.

“Are you freaking kidding me?” she said sternly in her annoying Long Island accent.

“Quickly now, I’m in a rush.”

She looked at the cheque in awe. “C’mon, kids, out the car,” she droned.

“I’ll take them too haha,” I joked. She simply scowled at me. “I don’t need any more kids. The ones I’ve got are great. They are really great. My sons are very successful as is my beautiful daughter. Very beautiful. If she weren’t my daughter I’d probably date her haha”

I drove through Times Square after my round of golf, saw myself advertised on a billboard. I looked really good up on those posters. Tremendous. Whoever did that advertisement did a tremendous job. I rushed to make the venue for my next speech. It was packed. Full to the brim. Thousands of people were screaming my name. They all loved me. Of course they did.

“Everyone fucking loves me,” I said to myself. The crowd silenced as I stepped up to my podium. “Let’s make America great again!” I said boldly, a huge grin on my face. “Hilary has deleted thousands and thousands of emails. I’ll put her in jail... Now, if you see someone about to throw something, just hit ‘em, I’ll pay the legal fees!... There’s a lot of evil hombres that need to be kept out by that wall, and nobody will build a better wall than me.”

The crowd was loving it. I had this in the bag. “Obama won’t be sleeping easy tonight. You know, I don’t think he’s even American!” I looked across the tremendous crowd, smiling. “I am fucking great,” I thought.

Sisterly Love

Jessica Wheeler

Posted ugly pic,
Teach you to win at Scrabble.
The next game is mine!

Revenge best served cold
so there’s no hot water left.
Ha! Suck on that bitch!

I hate you, I do,
As a sister you’re horrid
but, like, not really.

Finch's First Lesson

Jessica Wheeler

Hanging over the edge of the roof Erinyes thought her evening could have been going better. Whilst other girls her age were out partying or talking about boys or other such nonsense here she was living a life of adventure. Admittedly, at that moment in time a little less adventure wouldn't have gone amiss but, then again, she really did love the adrenaline. Although she had been trying to build up her strength, as per Finch's instructions, she wasn't sure if she was yet strong enough to pull herself back up. She had little choice, however. It was either that or pick a fight with the ground after a five storey drop. It was colder than she had expected and she shivered as an icy wind tore through her clothing and almost made her lose her grip as her body swayed with the force of it.

"I am the Shadow of Death," a nasal voice somewhere above her announced. "I shall turn death into an art form. Murder is a canvas I use to show the world my mastery!"

Ignoring whatever nonsense was being spouted above her, Erinyes focussed on not becoming a greasy spot on the street below and gathered her strength. The muscles in her arms protested and a sweat broke out on her forehead as she struggled inch by inch to pull herself over the edge and landed panting on the floor at the feet of the man who had thrown her over. He was middle-aged and balding with watery blue eyes that looked rather disappointed she hadn't fallen to her death. Looking behind him she saw Finch had finally shown up.

"Well?"

"Well what?" Finch watched Erinyes while leaning against a brick wall, looking for all the world a wealthy and debonair business man in his pale grey pinstripe suit and leather gloves. The moonlight was reflected in his dark eyes and illuminated the two figures in front of him as Erinyes picked herself up off the ground. She was petite and slim and clad head to foot in what he guessed she believed to be appropriate fighting gear, black skinny jeans and a black t-shirt. Not very imaginative, but at least she had tied back her long, dark hair.

"Aren't you going to help?"

"And why would I do that, my dear Erinyes? If you wish to become my crime-fighting partner you must look out for yourself, I will not always be there to protect you."

"I almost fell off a roof!"

"But you didn't, that's the important part. Always focus on the positives."

"You said you would train me," Erinyes muttered as she danced away from a wildly swung punch from the man attacking her. He was not a particularly intimidating specimen but he was a fully-grown man while she was only a seventeen year-old girl, and he had just thrown her off the roof. Erinyes turned to raise her eyebrows at Finch just as her assailant landed a blow to her jaw, almost knocking her down.

"Ah, and there we have lesson one. Never look away from your opponent."

Frustrated, Erinyes sighed and turned back to face the man. Unsure what to do she tried punching him in the stomach. He let out a small 'oof' as her fist sank into his soft flesh, but she had not hit him hard enough to do any real damage.

"What did he do anyway? He looks like he could barely steal a kid's lollipop never mind commit an actual crime."

"Hey!" The Shadow of Death squealed indignantly.

"Quite right, Mr...?"

"Pettifer."

"Yes, Mr Pettifer, equal opportunities for all possible criminals, it is only fair."

Erinyes rolled her eyes and took the small distraction to try and break Pettifer's nose with her

elbow. She missed and attempted to convert the move into a headlock before realising she was too short to manage that so awkwardly stumbled into Pettifer who pushed her to the ground.

“I thought you were the Dimness of Death or something?”

He loomed over her and she actually saw him pout, “Shadow.”

“Pardon me, Pettifer, what was that?” Finch asked. “You really must enunciate your words if we are to have a hope of understanding you.”

“I am the Shadow of Death.”

“Going to make murder into an art form apparently,” Erinyes said as she stood and brushed small stones from her elbows where she had fallen. One of them was bleeding slightly and she scowled. “Have you actually killed anyone yet?”

“No,” Pettifer hesitated, “but you shall be my first!” He charged at Erinyes and she stepped out of the way. Like a bull who is confused when the red flag is pulled out of its path Pettifer skidded to a stop and about-turned. He snarled and reached for her.

Erinyes had been too distracted by how amusing his performance had been so did not notice his reaching hands until too late. Hands around her neck he began to strangle her.

“Finch?” She gasped as it became more and more difficult to breathe. Her hands scabbled uselessly as the tightening band deliberately choked her and lights began to flash in front of her eyes. With the last of her air she tried calling for Finch once more, but he did not respond. Taking matters into her own hands she used the only method left and kned Pettifer in the groin, hard. He grunted and let go, slowly sinking to his knees and looking at her, blue eyes filled with chagrin that he had once again failed to kill. Thinking quickly, not wanting to give him time to recover, Erinyes snaked out her foot and caught him under the chin. She watched his eyes roll back into his head and he fell to the ground unconscious.

Finch walked up behind her and offered her a pair of handcuffs. While she walked round the recumbent form of Pettifer, Erinyes looked over at Finch.

“Why didn’t you help me?”

He looked sheepish and did not answer.

“It was a test wasn’t it? You were testing my instinctual ability so you know what level to start teaching me from.” Manoeuvring Pettifer’s hands into the handcuffs she didn’t see Finch’s relieved look.

“Yes, that was exactly it... a test.” Noticing a strange note in his voice Erinyes’ head shot up and she looked him in the eye.

“That’s a lie.”

“Why would I lie?”

“I don’t know, you always pause when you lie to me.”

“Ah, that is definitely something I should remedy. Well, if you really must know I had to take a phone call.”

Erinyes snapped the handcuffs closed. “Excuse me? I almost died because you were on the phone? It better have been something important.” Catching the look on Finch’s face she sighed and tightened the cuffs. “It wasn’t was it?”

“It was a lovely Prince from Zimbabwe who wanted to give me half a million pounds.”

Erinyes stared at him. “Though probably not the best time it was, on the plus side, a lovely conversation.” Erinyes continued to stare. “I most profusely apologise and promise it will not happen again. Also, if you want Mr Pettifer here to have the continued use of his hands, I suggest you don’t tighten those cuffs any more.”

Erinyes looked down to see his hands slowly turning blue and, thinking that he deserved a whole lot worse than he was getting, tightened them just slightly more. Finch shook his head at her obstinacy as she bounded to her feet and grinned at him.

Both looked down as the heap on the ground groaned and tried to sit up. He peered blearily up at them and appeared confused. Then, remembering what had happened, the Shadow of Death's face crumpled and he burst into tears.

Unravelling

Jessica Wheeler

Torn apart I stare at the tatters of myself,
why again do I let this happen?
A fool stares at me through my tears
and why, why do I allow this?
Alone I sit, imagining myself to have
all the pain in this world.
Then I scorn myself, increasing
only my self-hate and not my self-worth.
For what do I know of pain?
I kid myself, I think of myself as alone
and then remember there are those lonelier.
Why do I seem to think only of me
then remember, always remembering that I am nothing,
drowning in my so-called sorrow?
Self-pity is worthless,
tears are selfish even when only I can see them
make their salty tracks.
I look at my unbroken shell covering what
feels fractured inside.
Who am I?
Where do I belong in this friendless place?

Mid-Autumn Festival

Jing Lee Yu

"Let's go, Mummy, faster!" I jumped up and down in front of the door, my brother already ahead of me outside the house.

"Okay okay, I'm here," my mother replied, grabbing a lighter as well as a bag of candles.

It was mid-autumn festival. People would bring lanterns, candles and sparkling sticks out to the park to play. It is also the day when people eat a rounded cake desert called the mooncake.

As we headed down in the lift and walked to a nearby park we saw others who were doing the same. It was already 7 p.m. at night but there was hardly any need for the streetlights as everything was clear from the natural glow of the full moon. Upon reaching the park, it was already packed with people as we were late due to Mummy not being ready on time. There was a variety of different lanterns around and the park was full of lights. I even noticed some children swinging around some sparkling sticks that looked pretty scary to me. We walked around and found a nice spot beside a bench and stopped there. My brother and I started to pull open our cylindrical paper lanterns, I had an orange one while he had it in yellow. While doing that I noticed someone

carrying a beautiful plastic lantern which was a shape of a dragon. I pointed at it, “Mummy, why his lantern is a dragon?”

“That one more expensive, we no money,” she replied, lighting up two candles and passing me and my brother one each.

We both put the candles in our lanterns and started playing with the lanterns. After about half an hour, I got bored and asked my brother “Yu Xiang, let play some candles instead.” He nodded, and we passed our lanterns over to my mother and took some candles from her. She passed him the lighter as she didn’t trust me with it. I was too young to touch a lighter she would say. We went to the pavement beside the bench and started lighting up a few candles. This was something me and my brother would always do, we would light up the candles and let some wax drip on the ground then stick the candles into the wax and it would stand there. We neatly arranged a few candles together, sticking alternating colours of candles to make a colourful line.

“Eh, lets make a heart!” I shouted.

“Aiyo don’t so gay leh, lets make a *star*,”¹ my brother replied.

I sulked a little but went ahead with his idea. We started on our plan to make a star, each taking one side still not forgetting to alternate the colour of the candles to make it colourful. Before we knew it, it was already late.

“Lai its late liao, lets go home and have some mooncakes,”² Mummy interrupted.

“Huh, so soon...” both me and my brother whined as we started to follow her home. I gave one last glance at the shapes that we’d drawn with the lanterns and thought of how the festival was over. All the festivals always end so quickly but when it’s studying it lasts forever. It is going to be so long before the next festival comes.

Hangover Haiku Connor McGladdery

‘Hello my name is...’
I want to throw up help me
‘Connor, I’m third year’

Not Nina Simone
Dead birds, you know how I feel
Never felt less good

If a fly couldn’t
What would we think to call it?
A walk seems very rude

I’m not lazy, see
Wake up at the crack of noon
Then go for a nap

¹Aiyo is a form of sighing.

²Lai means come, liao means already.

Pasar Malam

Jing Yi Goh

‘Wah syok. So cool now. Just now afternoon was so hot.’

I wiped away sweat on my brow, looking at the setting sun between two lush green mountains in the distance. Magnificent clouds waltzed around the egg yolk orange sun, the now cool blue sky their dance floor. I paused for a bit, marvelling at the fact that, here in Malaysia, I could just slap on a plain T-shirt with khakis and head out anywhere I wanted without turning into an icicle in three seconds. Something I never really appreciated before attending university in Scotland. Some things you take for granted until you lose them.

‘What do you expect? Ipoh ma. Went to UK for a few years, forget already?’ It was Adrian, slamming the door of my blue MyVi as he got off from the passenger seat. He too, was wearing a plain T-shirt and khakis. Personally, I always thought his short stature was an absolute fit for his feisty personality. ‘And by the way, your driving sucks, we could’ve reached here in half the time. You so scared of the road for what?’

‘Eh, shut up la. Talk so much,’ I jabbed back. ‘Where’s Ming Han?’

‘Looking for car park. He just messaged me.’

‘Hah? But he lives 15 minutes away only, why not walk?’

‘How I know? Got car use car la. Why not you ask him yourself?’

I wondered why Adrian was grinning when a hand slapped my back and almost sent me flying. ‘Broooo. Long time no see! How you’ve been?’ Squinty eyes, thick glasses, with his signature bright smile, it had to be Ming Han.

‘Weyyyy. Long time no see! Got girlfriend already not, ya ass?’

‘Hah? Actually, I do. Ahaha.’ He gave an embarrassed but genuinely happy smile. ‘Didn’t you see my insta?’

‘I did, but waiting for you to tell me in person la!’

‘Eh!’ Adrian interjected, ‘So worried about his girlfriend for what? Not yours also. Can we go eat before you try to stalk his girlfriend?’

I couldn’t help but burst out laughing. ‘You still every day eat eat eat only!’

But no wonder he was hungry. From under the first of many rows of huge, colourful umbrellas erected by the roadside, a *pakcik* was tending to his stall, arranging tube after tube of bamboo containing sweet glutinous rice around a charcoal fire. His slow fanning of the charcoal flame wafted the fragrant scent of *lemang* towards us, making our stomachs rumble.

I glanced at my watch, 6 p.m. Already, a flurry of activity was going on in the *pasar malam* in front of us, the night market. Vendors were shouting their wares, be it odd toys or sugar cane drinks; various flavours of soups were simmering away at a mobile hotpot stand; another charcoal fire blossomed, releasing with it the irresistible aroma of satay and peanut sauce – a match made in heaven. The ravenous beast in my stomach threatened to tear me open if I did not cater to its demands soon.

‘Eh what you doing? Come on!’ Adrian started a purposeful march, towards a stall selling blue glutinous rice and spicy beef *rendang*, the ultimate combination.

‘Yeah, come on. This place gonna be *people mountain people sea* soon.’ Ming Han started walking towards Adrian.

I basked in the warm, rowdy atmosphere of the *pasar malam* - feeling the hot night wind; surrendering to the magnificent aromas of food attacking my nostrils; listening to the low rumble of portable generators under all the merry shouting and price-haggling. The sun had set now, and endless strings of incandescent bulbs illuminated the stalls. The whole place was enveloped in a warm and comforting yellow aura. I started towards Adrian and Ming Han. Looking at their keen stride towards dinner, I felt glad.

I'm at home.

The Best Day Ever

Michael Dodds

Fantastic, another day. I am so excited. I can't wait to see my human and eat that stuff she gives me and then she'll probably rub my belly and tell me I'm a good boy (which I am) and then I'll go outside and it will be amazing. Maybe we'll go to that place with the other dogs and *their* humans and the big wet thing with the flying things in it that make the funny noise and I can go in and get all wet and chase them and it'll be the best day ever. And maybe all the small humans will be there like last time and they'll throw those long brown things for me to chase and it'll be the most funnest thing ever (even though after I catch it they always try to take it off me, even though it's mine, and I don't like that but then they throw it away again and I get to chase it again which I *really* like! They are so silly, why would you throw away such a fun thing?) Anyway, after that I'll be thirsty so I'll go and drink the big wet thing and it will be the most delicious thing ever and then I'll go and check on my human and make sure she is having the best day ever too because I love her - she is the best human - and after that I'll go to the big brown thing with the green hair that is stuck in the ground and it always smells amazing because that's where me and my friends make our mud and squirt water. I'm so excited to see my friends, I'm going to run over to them and shout, "you are my best friend! I love you very much!" and they will shout back, "You are my best friend! I love you very much!" and we will have the best day ever!

Oh my goodness I am so excited, I better wake up my human right now so we can start:
"Wake up, human, it's the best day ever!!"

Trainspotting

Olivia Lyster

I stroll through the long grey corridor to the waiting room lined with worn teal coloured fabric seats. "Lesley McKinnon?" I shout. One of the regulars. She stands up, looking as unkempt as ever. Her greasy hair is slicked against her face. There are holes in her pink puffa jacket, and she is carrying tonnes of carrier bags with god knows what in them.

"Hiya, doc," she says in her common voice, speaking through her nose. She looks well, despite her appearance. I am torn: I feel sorry for her, but the other half of me battles that she has chosen to put herself in this position. She is the gold standard of what we call an abuser of the healthcare system. She takes advantage of the free for all, and takes no responsibility for her own health. I was, however, trained to look after patients who are actually ill, not attention seeking. I simply do not have time for this, and have every intention of keeping this as short as possible.

"She will not fool me today," I think to myself, as I show her along the corridor to my consultation room.

“How can I help you today, Lesley? I can see you attended our practice just last week.” I am trying to hide my judgement, which I know is showing on my face, slowly but surely.

“I’m just really sore, doc. I can barely move. I think I need stronger painkillers. I also canny work cos it’s sore, so can you give me another a sick note for next week?”

I am relatively shocked that she has a job in the first place. Complete dregs of society, one of the people they warn us about on daytime TV, which I’m sure she watches plenty of herself.

“Well first things first, Lesley, I can see you can in fact move. You walked here today, and walked into my office fine. The GP last week prescribed a generous dose of painkillers for you - you say they’re not helping at all? I’m afraid I can’t give you a sick note until I know, and decide myself, what is wrong.” I do not stutter or slip up on my words once. I can see aggression in her face rising, but she has chosen the wrong doctor to try to manipulate. I didn’t go through years of training to be faced with lowlife scum such as Lesley. She is a regular attender of nearby A&E, I assume in order to get free food. I wonder if working for her own money to buy her own food is a thought that has ever occurred to her.

“How would you know how I feel? You’re not me. I’ve tried they dihydrocodeine tablets and they do nothing.”

“Dihydrocodeine is a relatively strong painkiller. *Where* is your pain? I suspect if it ‘does nothing’, then what we need to do is investigate why, not continue to prescribe painkillers to cover a pain we know nothing about.” I snap back, air quoting her ridiculous statement back to her, using my medical knowledge to call her bluff. Normally I would be sympathetic to poorly controlled pain, but this woman is at it.

“But please, doc, I’m sore. It’s doing nothing. I think I need that morphine...” I knew this was coming, as I rightly assume she is a drug abuser. You can tell who they are straight away.

“Look, Lesley, you have a strong painkiller now that another doctor has given you. I would not have done that without investigations first, so count yourself lucky that you have those tablets. Take them as prescribed and get paracetamol or ibuprofen over the counter in the meanwhile. I’ll arrange for some bloods to get taken and for further investigations to be done. Now tell me where your pain is. I am not prescribing anything until you explain your pain to me.”

“It’s everywhere, I’m sore everywhere. I feel like I’ve been beat up,” she says, whilst I question whether she possibly has been beat up by one of her drug gang. It’s awful to think, but generally true in reality. I didn’t sign up to be in *Trainspotting* when I became a doctor.

“What I recommend is a nice warm bath, continuing with the painkillers and further investigations. I do not want to dope you up without knowing what’s wrong,” I say, defending my decision to not give her ‘that morphine’ she wants. “The other doctor gave you a sick note for this week, and its only Tuesday. I am not happy giving you one for all of next week quite yet.”

Her face drops, but she also seems like she was prepared for this. The other GP she saw, Dr McIntosh, is a sweet girl, but one of that bunch who trained at a medical school which pushes all the touchy-feely rubbish. It’s important at times, sure, but in my position as a doctor I will not be manipulated. Lesley chose the lifestyle she has, and she must take responsibility for that. She will certainly not be getting any painkiller scripts or sick notes off me any time.

I look at her without cracking but with a slight smile, maintaining professionalism with my stethoscope like a medallion round my neck. “If you don’t mind now, Lesley, I’ll just examine you to see if we can work out the problem.” She is the image of a child in the huff: her arms are crossed, her face is solemn. “Can you pop your coat off and have a seat on the bed?”

I can smell the musk of unwashed clothes when she takes her coat off, and I hold my breath. This is one of the biggest challenges of the job: drug addicts are like toddlers who have tantrums. She sits on the bed, looking small as her legs dangle over the side. I stand up, towering over her, and take my stethoscope off my neck and place the earpieces in. “I’m just going to have a listen to your

chest,” I say, placing the stethoscope on her chest through her pink t-shirt, making a mental note to wash it well afterwards. “Take a deep breath in and out please.”

“I’m assuming you’re a smoker Lesley?” I say, smelling it off her. “Aye I am,” she scuffs back. She has one of those voices that you can tell has been tobacco filled for years, that low-tone huskiness to every sound. Her chest sounds remarkably clear despite the neglect it’s been subjected to over the years. She looks way older than thirty-two. Up close, I can see how much her mousey brown hair sticks to her head with grease. I should’ve worn gloves.

I am watching the clock hoping the ten minutes with her is nearly over, and thankfully, it is.

“I can’t hear anything worrying. Nowhere else on you looks unwell to me. Next step is bloods – book yourself in with the phlebotomist at reception. Thanks for coming in,” I say bluntly, turning my back on her. I make a point of thoroughly washing my hands.

“Can you not do that for me?” she says, and I can feel my blood boil inside me.

“No,” I snap, “that is not my job.” The audacity. Is she unable to take any shred of responsibility for her own health?

“Right. I’ll do that. Thanks, doctor.” She replies through gritted teeth, unhappy that I am not pandering to her little demands.

“You’re welcome,” I reply, happily watching her walk through my door as I hastily close it behind her. I push the dispenser of alcohol hand gel and douse my hands in it, never having been so happy to smell the strong ethanol in my life.

The Lift

Rachael Annandale

The young man threw his arm out to catch the doors, letting an older man in.

“Thanks, son.”

The younger man, brushing his red hair aside, smiled meekly in return.

“Sixteen please.”

The two men began to ascend.

“You’re Greg’s intern aren’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“I wouldn’t worry about him. He gives everyone a hard time. He’s a big softie really.”

“Can’t say I’ve seen that side to him.”

“Took me a while to see it too, son. Don’t let it phase you. How long is that you’ve been with us now then?”

“Nearly three months. Moved down here at the beginning of the year. It’s actually my last week.”

“What a shame! Well I hope you’ve enjoyed it here.”

Through the smudged remnants of fingerprints on the glass, the street below was visible. The queues of cars on both sides of the road sat stagnant. Men and women shoved past each other, defeated, not seeing who they passed. There were no smiles in sight.

“How long have you been here?”

“Too long,” the older man chuckled. “You’re lucky. Moving down here while you’re young. So much to do! Do you go out much?”

“Not really. Don’t really know many folk down here.”

“A bunch of us often go to the pub round the corner for a pint after work on Fridays. Always welcome to join. Mind you, you probably don’t want to be spending your weekends with us old folks. Probably have better offers”

“Thanks, might take you up on that.”

They paused at the 12th floor and an attractive woman in a low-cut, creased blouse entered. She greeted the older man, ignoring the other.

“Morning, Ronnie”

“Hi, Hazel.”

The 12th floor revealed much more of the city. It ran for miles, both out the way and up. Grey buildings of varying heights towered over every street. Only a keen eye could glimpse the flecks of green, most of their sunlight stolen by the city’s architecture.

Ronnie turned to the young man. “Today’s the big day isn’t it?”

“What? I..um, big day?”

“Isn’t it today you marketing lot have the release of the new advert?”

“Oh that, yes. Yes, that’s today,” the young man replied uneasily. He began to fidget as the doors opened once again to let Hazel out.

Many of the rooftops were below the men now. Concrete jigsaw pieces scattered apart. The sun was slightly brighter up here. Neighbouring windows exposed identical offices and more men in suits.

“Are you not getting out at eighteen?” Ronnie said, noticing the lit up buttons on the wall.

“What you going all the way up to the top for?”

“You not heard about the new rooftop bar?”

Ronnie smiled curiously, “Apparently not! I’ll need to try it sometime.”

There was a melodic ding and the doors opened. Ronnie took a step out before turning back.

“Enjoy the rest of your time here, Ryan. I’ll see you around.”

“You know my name?”

“Of course! Just took me a while to remember it. The whole lift up actually, embarrassingly. That’s what age does to you I’m afraid.”

The doors shut as Ryan’s hand reached towards the buttons.

Autumn Leaves

Jing Yi Goh

Crunching footsteps fade
Slowly in the burning woods
A broken heart weeps.

TDR

Sarah Mow

“Thanks Dad, bye Caleb,” I say as I fumble with the car door, trying to clip that last bit of stray hair into my bun. It’s always slightly chilly outside at seven in the morning and I shiver a bit while walking down the dark alley leading to an inconspicuous black door at the side of Sheraton Towers Singapore. There’s a line of people spilling out from it, and I quickly scan the faces to see if there’s anyone I know. There isn’t and I sigh in relief, closing my eyes and trying to catch a few winks while standing in line even as I move closer and closer to the sign-in sheet.

The bright white light illuminates the interior of the old building, drawing attention to every line on the tiled floor and every crack of paint on the wall. As a group of us bundle into an elevator, there’s a murmur of good mornings from the exceptional few who are fully awake at this time of day. I usually try to smile and nod in answer, but I’m not a morning person.

The grumpy lady at the linen counter hands me my uniform and I squeeze down the narrow corridor into the ladies’ changing room to get dressed. Silky stockings first, followed by a pale brown shirt with eight buttons, black pants, a wrap-around apron and finally some sensible black loafers with padded soles. Something about the comfortable familiarity of this routine never fails to get me ready to face an eight-hour shift, and by the time I swipe on a bit of lipstick and head out to the breakfast hall I’m calling out “Good morning!” too and grinning at the elderly hunchbacked uncle who’s always at the lockers same time as me.

The fried noodles they’re serving today are especially spicy so I leave the canteen with lips burning and eyes smarting. My tears make everything a bit of a beige blur on my way to the kitchens. The floor is covered in ecru square tiles with dark grouting in between, the walls painted a creamy version of the colour. The hotel was built in the 1980s and I don’t think the nude-coloured backrooms have ever been redone or updated. There’s nothing beautiful about these hallways. They are boring and plain but serve their purpose and I suppose they do nothing to distract us from our work.

The kitchens are shiny and sparkling after their nightly scrub-down, yet to be marred by the day’s oil and grime. I hurry past the metal counters and hunch over to protect myself from the blast of cold air that hits me as I step into the dining hall. The sharp click of my footsteps becomes a soft thud on the rich maroon carpet, its golden diamond-shaped trimmings slightly faded and stained, but still very grand. Dickson is at the reception desk when I get there and I squeak out a hello before quickly scanning his hand-written list to find out which station I’ve been posted to today.

Dickson is everything a head manager of a restaurant should be – polished and professional, with the kind of no-nonsense manner that instils reverence and fear in young inexperienced part-timers like me. During service he often stands in a corner scanning the room, nothing escaping his shrewd observation. Even though his dark suit blends in with the colours of our surroundings, I always know exactly where he is. I would usually find anyone with a bald head like his with tufts of black hair sprouting from the sides comical, but I’ve never wanted to laugh when I look at Dickson. When he does serve tables, his movements are sharp and crisp and there’s a certain flair to the way he opens menus and lays out napkins on the lap of guests. Although he frightens me I much prefer him to Steven, our assistant manager. My friend Theo and I are convinced Steven is a pervert. He’s the one who told us to wear sheer stockings instead of socks, and is constantly trying to make us wear more make up.

It’s seven-thirty and breakfast has begun. Everyone is rushing to and fro from kitchen to dining hall, carrying in trays full of dirty dishes and coming out with their warm and clean replacements. I’m under Apple this morning. As efficient as ever, she tells me she can handle the table-waiting and I’m to fetch more forks and knives.

“Yes, Apple,” I say and signal to Theo that I’m going in. She slips away into the kitchens too and together we lift the dishwasher cover to take out a basket of freshly-washed cutlery, scalding our hands on the steam as we do. After going home every day during my first week on the job with what must have been first degree burns, my hands have become used to the heat and I don’t even flinch. What makes me cringe, though, is the sticky slimy feel of a food morsel that has somehow made it through the machine without being washed away. Disgusted, I wipe it off on the edge of the towel I’m using to dry the cutlery. I wonder if these towels are ever washed because there’s a mustiness to the drying area that I’m sure is from them. Theo’s story about this morning’s customer-of-the-day distracts me from this – he is an Indonesian gentleman having blueberry jam with his scrambled eggs on toast. The clink of metal against metal as we work has a certain rhythm to it, and I like how this mixes with the sound of our laughter.

“Any pit sweat?” Theo asks me as we each lift a heavy tray up on our shoulders, balancing it expertly with one hand on the rough, grainy surface of the tray’s base and the other on the front edge to hold it steady. It’s warm and humid in the washing area, but we haven’t been here long enough to start sweating proper so the cloth at Theo’s underarm is still it’s usual sandy brown. Our running joke about Auntie Susan and the ever-present dark circles at her armpits makes us giggle all the way to the threshold where tile becomes carpet, after which we become serious and walk out to our stations like the professional waitresses we are.

The hotel is at full capacity and the morning passes swiftly in a busy rush. Finally, it’s time for my lunch break, and I head down with Auntie Susan. As much as I make fun of her pit stains, she’s my favourite person here after Theo and we chat about her two-year-old grandson all the way to the canteen. Lunch today is stewed chicken Chinese-style – I get a whiff of it all the way from the other end of the corridor. It is so different from upstairs in the kitchen and dining hall where there are just too many smells to for there to be a smell, if that makes any sense. There is just one meat dish and one vegetable dish, each with a distinct salty and earthy odour respectively. I can even make out the jasmine fragrance of the rice.

I always eat more than I should at lunch and then stretch out on one of the long benches in the ladies’ room for a cat nap. The hard wooden planks look uncomfortable but actually provide a nice massage for my aching shoulders and back. Before I know it, the hour is up and we pay a visit to that same fierce laundry lady, hoping our napkins are ready and we won’t have to chase her for it.

Auntie Susan and I re-enter the restaurant, our arms full of the crisp white linen. I hear distinct clicks of silverware against ceramic and can even make out the slow jazz music playing at the nearby bar – looks like lunch will be quiet today. I plant myself at the napkin folding station, making myself busy before someone calls me to clean the coffee machines or help the pastry chef, which would be even worse. The young petite pastry chef is absolutely lovely, but I can’t remember her name even though she’s told me at least five times. It’s one of those unusual names, either Davina or Davinda or Darlinda, and to avoid embarrassment and awkwardness I keep away from her as much as possible.

Going rapidly through the napkin pile, I eavesdrop on Siti and her cousin Ramya. They’re gossiping about their family as usual. Ramya is getting married in two months and her father refuses to pay a cent for the wedding because he doesn’t approve of Ramya’s husband-to-be and to be honest, neither do I. His name is Hazim and he works as a porter at the lobby. He’s slimy and Machiavellian and gives me the creeps.

Dickson appears just as I’m folding the last napkin, instructing me to refill the water jugs. I do so and then find myself standing at one of the stations with nothing to do. I wriggle my feet in my shoes, feeling the dampness in the sole and the slime between my toes and know that they must smell absolutely revolting. I slip my phone out of its apron pocket and check the time. Is it really only one-thirty? I turn towards the outside garden so that no one can see me make a face.

Sheraton is generally quite old and run down, as is its one and only restaurant. The carpet is very faded and there are scratches on the fancy gilding of the wooden chairs, not to mention the thick dust on the artificial orchids that decorate each table. To me, its saving grace is the floor-to-ceiling glass windows that give guests a view of a small tropical garden with red lipstick palms, hibiscus bushes and a tranquil koi pond. The sun is out today and the garden is mesmerizingly beautiful. I spend the next hour alternating between refilling water glasses and staring out the window, watching the koi gobble up the tiny brick-coloured pellets thrown to them by the gardener.

I wince as I feel a familiar elbow jab my ribs – it’s Theo telling me the ten-minute countdown to three o’clock has begun. One by one we take turns to make our usual round of the buffet tables, trying to be as casual and inconspicuous as possible. The round ends behind the coffee machines where we report to a man we affectionately know as ‘Uncle’.

“So, girls, what will it be today?”

We recite our list: apple strudel (“Of course!”), tiramisu, fried calamari and lamb biriyani.

Uncle gives us the thumbs up and we scurry into the kitchen to wait for him.

At three o’clock sharp there’s a crowd gathered round the stainless steel counter top in the middle of the washing area. Auntie Susan sighs in relief as Theo massages her shoulders, and Siti and Ramya are giggling with some of the night-shift girls who’ve just come in. Everyone cheers at the rattle of Uncle’s trolley as it rolls over the kitchen tiles, quickly followed by shushing sounds from Siti, shutting us up before Dickson hears.

We attack the leftovers like ravenous seagulls. Theo and I snatch the apple strudel from the trolley and swiftly jam two pieces of it in our mouths, each. Ten seconds later, the plate is empty and Siti chucks it into the dishwasher. I close my eyes and savour the flaky pastry with its coating of powdery sugar and the caramelised apple filling underneath. When the biriyani comes in we use our hands to scoop up some of the yellow rice and I manage to grab the gigantic piece of lamb shank, much to Ramya’s dismay. It’s messy and undignified, but our pay of seven-fifty³ an hour gives us licence to be as barbaric as we want.

I’m watching the clock as it strikes the half hour mark. I say goodbye to Theo (she’s working till four) and then venture back into the dining hall to be dismissed. Dickson grunts his approval and I mumble my thanks and run away.

Back through the bland corridors I go, stopping off and on to roll my tired ankles until I finally reach my locker and pick up my things. With every piece of clothing I change I feel more and more exhausted and by the time I slip my foul-smelling feet into my Japanese slippers I’m yawning so badly I can barely see.

“TDR right?” the guard asks, referring to The Dining Room, the very original and imaginative name given to my place of work. I smile and say, “Yup, that’s me.” He hands me my pay, the plastic notes stapled together with the fifty-cent coin carefully scotch-taped to the top and the amount of fifty-two dollars and fifty cents carefully stencilled in pencil on the uppermost note. I will never get over how funny this is, and also how many staple bullets and rolls of tape are wasted on it.

I finally leave the building, taking in my first breath of fresh air in eight hours and head towards the bus stop, relishing the feel of being a proper working adult. Tomorrow’s my last day and I can’t believe I’ve spent six months of my gap year here. It’s become a pretty big part of my life and I’ll be sorry to say goodbye. With a sigh I lean against the cool glass of the bus window and shut my eyes, resolving to pluck up the courage and look Dickson in the eye when I bid him farewell tomorrow.

³Equivalent to approximately £4

They're Going to Eat Me Alive

Abbie McAlinden

I really hate it when James gets into one of these moods. I am trying my best but he just doesn't seem to see that. Ok, so the kitchen was a bit of a riot and his dinner wasn't ready but this isn't my fault! Decorating a new house is just so time-consuming and I need to do it right so James can be proud to show off his home to his colleagues. I just lost track of time, I suppose. My mind was so filled with swatches – and the wise words of all those seasoned interior designers in the magazines that I ordered – that I didn't even notice that I was sitting in the dark until it was too late. Maybe I should have been more aware, more vigilant? He didn't have to yell so loud. Or smash his glass like that. I better get that cleaned up before it hurts somebody.

He doesn't mean it though, I know that. He's truly the loveliest man I have ever met; he's so giving and is always working so hard to provide for us. I don't even have to work anymore, he says. So I stay here; my new full-time job being to make this house a home. Everything's going to look so wonderful when I'm done. Maybe we will start inviting his associates here for dinner and drinks rather than always being invited to their homes but never returning the favour. James wouldn't have had them coming to our old apartment, or the house right now with the state that it's in. Which is fair; our apartment was small and tired looking. It didn't really survive the transition from fresh young graduates still holding onto student life to that of young professionals. This house does need a bit of work before it will match the calibre of some of his older, more senior colleagues but I'll get it there. I have no doubts about that. We got this place for such a steal as it's a definite project home that others clearly did not have the time, or dedication, to devote to it.

I do, though, I have all the time in the world now. It hasn't exactly been easy to adjust to, I will admit that. I've always been one who thrived in a fast paced, structured work environment so it can be a little difficult being in the house all day. But once I get this design work underway then I'll feel a little more like myself again. I show James my scrapbook at night when he comes home; I've been writing all of my ideas there and it's filled with pictures and ideas from my magazines. He doesn't really have too much to say about it but that's just because he's tired from his long working days. He says that he doesn't have much of an eye for design and that I am to do as I please but he's selling himself short. The suggestions that he does make are so clever: I would never have thought of them. I've made sure to work in the colours that he likes and I'm planning on ordering marble for the kitchen; he always admires that in other homes. I've noticed these things. I've got another little book where I write them down, but he doesn't know about that. I think it's important that we know these things about each other. It shows you care.

There is one thing that we have been disagreeing on which is starting to get a bit ridiculous. The fact of the matter is there is only so much work that I can do for myself – painting, building flat-pack furniture and the like – so when it comes to manual labour I'm going to be useless. I asked around for contact numbers of contractors before bringing this up with him so that he would know that I had found people that were good and trustworthy. I thought this made more sense and would show that I had planned this out but... I don't know, maybe I just caught him on the end of a bad day. He wasn't too happy with the whole idea of having me alone with strangers, or having strangers in the house at all. We don't have much choice though since we bought this place as something to be worked on. And for all his virtues he really isn't a handy man and you want professionals in doing this type of work. Plus, it's not as though he can just take time off work to supervise or do any of it himself. I'll talk to him about it again soon when he's in better spirits and I have a full plan figured out. Then all he'll need to do is ok it and phone the contractor and everything will be easy. I could cook a nice meal for him before I bring it up again and, this time, not forget to have it ready in time. I'll need to remember and amend our Sainsbury's delivery order to suit. Having your shopping

delivered is the best thing since sliced bread, I swear. It saves us so much time, since James doesn't have to take me out for the weekly shop anymore.

I hope he comes back soon and that he'll have calmed down. I hate it enough we have these fights but I hate it even more when he won't talk to me. It's the way that he just carries on doing whatever it may be that really bothers me. Does he see me as a child who needs to be scolded? I really hope not. I'm his wife, which makes me his equal. And I want to be that for him, I really do. He deserves to be with someone that he can be proud of and that he can rely on. He tests me on this sometimes; I'm not sure if he knows that I know. It's little things, like moving an ornament or changing the arrangement of the tins in the cupboard. Things to test whether or not I am paying attention. It's funny really, like a little game. I do the same back to him to see if he notices and everything always ends up back where it should be. He can be persistent, though, like he is being a little boy, which just makes it all the funnier. There was once that he continually moved our wedding portrait from the feature wall to the wall with the window, where I had already said it didn't suit. This went on for a while until I couldn't be bothered moving it anymore. I guess it looks fine there; I just liked the way the light fell on it on the feature wall. That doesn't happen anymore.

I have made a start on sorting out the kitchen and there is a meal on the go for him returning so hopefully that will ease his mood. It might be a little more difficult if he's gone to the bar to cool off though... I really hope that he hasn't. Not that he can't have a drink whenever he wants, of course, but I just don't like the people that he drinks with. They are spiteful and mean-spirited and nothing like my husband at all. He doesn't need to be around them and their wicked words about their wives, colleagues and whatever other topic they sink their teeth into. James repeats their conversations to me sometimes and they can be totally abhorrent. He doesn't get himself involved in it all, though. He isn't like them and it is so clear to see that everyone in the bar must wonder why he's with them. I ask him myself but that never goes very far. He just says that they have all been friends for so long that he can't let differing opinions come between them. I don't think I agree.

Friends are supposed to be the people you can rely on to support you, be there for you and help you to become a better person. Not the kind whose words make your stomach churn. Like Katie. I used to tell her the stories that James told me and she was appalled so I know it isn't just me being sensitive like I can be from time to time. Then again, she never particularly liked him very much. And she's my best friend so naturally she'd take my side. Ugh, I don't know. It's too troublesome and tiring to even think about... I need to phone Katie soon, or text her, to see if we can meet up at some point. That way I could get her opinion on this whole contractor business. She will know what to do. Though she'll probably tell me to 'fuck James' opinion and do what you want'; this is her standard response to most things where James is concerned. Except when it came to us getting married, God, I thought that was going to kill our friendship. She told me to say no! I could hardly believe it, after it was clear that she wasn't joking. She thinks that I can do better but I am happy so that will just have to be enough for her. I haven't seen her for so long it would be nice to have some girl time again – hopefully with no drama. With James already in a mood I couldn't bear to fight with anyone else.

The last time we had a fight like this he came back with such a beautiful bouquet of flowers and a heartfelt apology which positively melted any annoyance I felt toward him. As if I could keep it up around him, anyway. He knows that he doesn't need to make these grand gestures though, as I will always forgive him. That's what you do when you love someone and he truly deserves it with everything I put him through with my stellar track record for mucking things up. I do the best I can to keep him happy, even with all the hassle I bring his way. He's been there for me through it all and I simply cannot imagine life without him. He brought me endless cups of tea, chocolate and hugs at exam and dissertation season; he held back my hair when my mind wouldn't let me hold anything in; and he's helping me weather the storm of fear of becoming a mother. I know how lucky I am.

That's James home now which is a relief, even if I did jump out my skin when the door slammed closed. I must have been day dreaming again. Didn't I just tell myself that I have to be more aware?

Childhood Memory

Zi Xin Lim

Once everyone arrived in class, we huddled around someone's table, getting excited for the battle. The fans did nothing to help the sweltering weather, yet it was against school rules to bring a portable handheld fan. Instead, they made it a school rule that girls had to have short hair. As bad as this sounds, it only got worse as your hair could only be at most five centimetres below your ears. The school even went as far as creating plastic sheets so it would be easier to check the length of our hair every day, and even if one single strand was a millimetre too long, we'd get a free haircut in the discipline office.

It was the daily rubber spinning competition, and all of us wanted to be champions. I'd bought mine a few weeks back, and meticulously used the sides of the rubber, perfecting its smoothness. I noted how new my opponents' rubbers looked, with their perfect ninety-degree edges. Idiots, that's going to increase their resistance to the air when they spin it! I took out my little box and opened it to see my prized rubber sitting in a pile of baby powder. I patted the powder all over the rubber as part of my daily ritual to increase the smoothness of the rubber's surfaces, and I was ready.

"Eh, you guys ready or not? *Cher'* coming soon *leh*,"

"Ya lor, can faster start please? If not once Miss Lee comes then cannot play *liao*."

"If your rubber not on table in 5 seconds, considered disqualified okay. 5, 4, 3, 2-"

There was a scramble and before you knew it, all the participants were on the table awaiting their match.

"Okay okay, start in three! Three, two, one, go!"

The stopwatch started; we spun our rubbers and watched intensely to see who would emerge champion. One by one the rubbers stopped spinning, and we watched in awe as the last rubber went on and on, spinning far longer than the rest before coming to a stop.

"Eh *walau*, what you do to your rubber *sia*? How can it be possible?"

"Ya *weih*, don't keep all the tips to yourself, sharing is caring!"

The kid smiled victoriously, and lifted up his rubber to reveal the flat side of a thumbtack. We ooh-ed and ahh-ed over his ingenuity, and hurried back to our seats as we heard the clicking of our teacher's heels coming closer. Over the next 2 weeks, there was a series of thefts in the classroom. One by one the thumbtacks used to pin announcements up on board went missing, and it escalated to a point where they had to make an announcement in the weekly assembly before the incidents stopped.

Little did they know, it wasn't due to the stern warnings that the thieving ceased. Everyone who was present at the life-changing competition that day was enlightened, and not one of them didn't own that very accessory to bring their rubber spinning to the next level. Until the next must-have upgrade was discovered, there was peace in the classroom.

Observation

Abbie McAlinden

From outside the window trees, whose leaves had begun to fall from branches that burned like great fires over the park, could be seen. The sun hung low in the sky with the last of its light stretching over the land and casting vast shadows. There were children in the park bundled up in coats and hats and scarves running and playing in the dying light. Parents stood at the edges of the ruckus; some ready to intervene at a moment's notice while others were all too happy to relinquish responsibility to catch up on the latest gossip. That was the scene that the man observed from a storey above. His eyes followed every movement and captured every detail: he didn't miss a thing. He was broken out of his own little world by a doctor calling his name. She smiled politely and extended her hand to him in greeting before leading him to her office.

"Now, Mr Andrews, can you tell me a little about what is going on with you?" she asked him once they were both settled in their seats.

"There is nothing to tell, this is a waste of time," he argued.

"How can we judge it to be a waste of time if I am yet to find out why you are seeing me today?"

"Because this is all my daughter's doing – if there is anyone that you should be speaking to its her. Bloody women; they get hysterical over everything."

"Your daughter seems to be very worried about you, Mr Andrews."

The man huffed in response and slowly shook his head. He looked away from the doctor to the window between them, where the park could still be seen. The cheers of delight or injustice from the children were louder than before.

"Why don't you tell me a little bit about yourself? Help me get to know you better."

"What would you like to know?"

"About your health; past and current. Your family, your lifestyle and occupation. Anything really. Anything you want to share with me, whether or not it's what is worrying your daughter."

"Why can't you doctors just read our notes before we come in and see you. All that information is in there anyway. Seems like a far more efficient use of time than having us patients constantly repeating ourselves," the man muttered, his attention still on the window.

"From what I can see, Mr Andrews, it has been quite a number of years since you last saw a doctor so a lot can happen and change in that time," she reasoned. The doctor kept her gaze on the man, even if he was not meeting her own.

"Very well," he agreed with a sigh and looked toward the doctor but did not turn himself from the window. "My health at the moment is exemplary; I have not a thing to complain of. In the past I have suffered a few minor illnesses that passed with diet and rest. I have broken my tibia and humerus on the left and right respectively on a few occasions from playing physical sports as a young man. My parents both died in their eighties of causes I could not name. I have a son and daughter who are both well and a grandson by my daughter," he stopped for a moment and returned his attention to the window. "I am a retired architect but I still consult more often than not as the lack of structure has not been a welcome addition to my life. My wife and I spend a lot of time walking and meeting with friends. We have a good life."

He looked back to the doctor again and turned himself away from the window to face her head on. The sound of the children playing outside had begun to decrease as time wore on and the early darkness of winter was setting in.

"Are there any medical conditions that you are aware of that run in your family?" the doctor asked.

"There is the standard high blood pressure in the males and a few females have those mental vices that grip weaker minded women, but nothing pressing I don't think. There has been no

cancer or stroke or anything quite so disastrous.”

“Can you explain what you mean by ‘mental vices?’”

“What doctors probably called hysteria back in the day. You know; anxieties, problems coping with stress, that sort of thing. Something that having a strong mind and backbone makes you immune to.”

“I see... Mr Andrews, could you please explain to me why it is that your daughter prompted you to visit your GP in the first place?” The doctor had written few notes so far, but her pen was poised at the ready.

The man gave her a hard look and did not speak, merely staring at the woman opposite him before sighing once again.

“Now, bearing in mind she herself possesses a touch of hysteria since she had her son. She concerns herself and worries over everything, things that she would never have thought twice about before. That’s what having children does to women, you see.” He clasped his hands in front of himself. “She believes that I’ve been acting strangely lately, as I have taken to going for walks on my own during the day and picking my grandson up from school every day. I collected him once or twice a week to begin with, but he enjoys coming to my house and it prevents her rushing back from work. I don’t see what the harm is.”

“Why do you think she believes that these behaviours are strange?”

“I think it’s because I voiced my concerns to her regarding the caretaker of my grandson’s school. He is a shady character that I do not think should be allowed to work around children,” the man’s gaze strayed to the window where it was now too dark to see much beyond the shape of trees, then to the clock which showed that the appointment was fast approaching completion. Dinner would be soon. “I have seen him watching the children at break and lunch time as they play, and he’s always at the ready to jump in and assist despite there being staff present whose job it is to do that. There have been a few occasions where I have seen him signalling to an unseen figure – outwith the school grounds. I haven’t yet located who it is that he’s signalling to. I dread to think what the connotations of that are.”

“How do you see him doing these things if this isn’t at the time that you collect your grandson from school?”

“I have no choice but to observe!” the man’s tone had turned sharp. “I first noticed these things at the end of the school day so I had to take matters into my own hands. I come past the school on my daily walks and observe from a distance. Now, you know that I am not a criminal but there was one man who accused me of such. I’m trying to protect these children!” The man became quiet, balling his hands into fists and relaxing them over again.

“Mr Andrews, if you are becoming angry or upset we can postpone the rest of this discussion for another time,” the doctor offered as she fervently completed the current sentence on her notepad.

“Yes, I think that would be best. I’ve already said far too much that could be used against me. We won’t be continuing this conversation and you will destroy any materials that have documented evidence of this meeting, you understand?” The man quickly stood up from the chair and took one last look out of the window whose view was now nothing but a wall of darkness, before he quickly left the room.

The doctor followed him and nodded to the porter who was waiting outside, ready to escort the man back to his room.

Haiku and Poem Sequence

Bonnie Boyle

Where would I be, Mum,
without my fierce champion?
Ignorance is bliss.

The inspiration for these poems came from my relationship with my mum; once my arch nemesis, now my best friend. I pushed every boundary possible as a teenager, and drove her mad with worry, all the while truly believing myself to be in the right. When I became very ill aged 16, she was my fierce protector, and I know it took a great deal out of her to watch me come close to dying several times. As bleak as things seemed during that time, she always gave me hope for the future, and we would talk endlessly about the things I could do when I was well, such as dye my hair wild colours, get a tattoo, travel, or even apply for medical school. In the end I didn't follow all of those plans through, and she's probably glad of that, but without that hope for the future I don't know how I'd have kept going. My illness spanned five very difficult years, and today the strength of our bond is hard to put into words. I know that wherever life takes me I have a solid foundation in her, and for that I am very grateful.

16

You were always right, have I told you that?
When I was young, yet felt full-grown
You gave me strength, and I made you regret,
My belief in myself, you gave me that

I built walls around a body breaking down,
A shield, not made for battle,
But for hiding from what lay ahead
I lived in the moment, you taught me that.

And when I turned to face my foe
You became my armour, and that battle
Was lost and won together as you held my hand
You'd take my pain if you could, you said

Those years have passed, and though I'm grown,
I know you'll never leave my side.
And despite my faults and mistakes of youth,
I'm proud of me, you made me that

17

'We'll dye your hair green!' You laugh through tears,
Your face now aged beyond your years
Betrays your grief, words left unsaid
Too many hours spent by a hospital bed

Time is standing still for me,
Life carries on, how can that be?

The season's change, here's Autumn's rain,
I lose myself, but you remain

You've seen them in the street, you say,
My peers, who live life for today
Their youth and health, it makes you cry,
Can I dream? I can but try

Another day, no end in sight,
We talk about a future bright
We'll leave this room, and I'll be seen
Out in the street with hair dyed green

23

Will there be a day, I wonder,
When opening chords won't make you cry?
Years have passed since then,
Marked by wins and losses, yet
Through words unsaid,
I know we both relive those times
Together and apart, both welcoming
Feelings like old friends
Letting them flow through,
Rise and fall like tides;
Like boats in deep water
Not anchored, but moved
Each time we hear opening chords

Taken by surprise,
Yet each time less so
As familiar foe becomes friend
Falling tears, not for fear and strife,
Belonging not to what was, but
To what is, and what will be
Falling for joy, for
Memories held far from reach, not forgotten
But rounded, shaped into orbs of soft light
That glow and fade and,
When they explode,
Shatter into pieces and are remade
Whole again
As I was.
And we are, reminded
To keep going

The Temple

Pryanka Kunte

“Come this way, Priyanka,” my mum tells me, directing me past the gate and to the back entrance of the house. “Quickly wash up, wear your traditional clothes and then pay your respects to your granduncle.” But of course I knew that, I have been visiting him here for years.

To anyone who is unfamiliar with a Hindu temple, most of the practices we follow would seem bizarre - even overwhelming. The temple itself is owned by my granduncle, a priest of sorts, and so essentially it belongs to my family.

“What are you going to wear?”

“A simple costume today, I guess. I’ll save the fancier one for the main ceremony tomorrow.”

“Okay, make sure you put your bindi and bracelets on. And bring your clothes with you into the bathroom! This is not our own house, don’t walk out in a towel.”

“Yes Mum, I know.”

“Okay, take your sister with you.”

My mum hurries away to wash up. Every time we come here to the temple her face immediately changes; stoic and burdened with the duties of being a good daughter-in-law. As a result my sister and I enjoy complete freedom when we are here. There are usually so many devotees and family members milling around during big occasions that no one really pays much attention to us. Right now, however, the house is empty. We are the first ones to arrive.

“Didi³, we need to get hot water first.”

“I know, I’ll ask Mum how to get it.”

“Don’t you remember how we did it the last time? There was a big wok over some hot coals and we literally heated the water over fire.”

“That was years ago, surely the technology has changed?” I am hoping it has. I have no idea how to get any kind of fire going, and we really need hot water to bathe. It is a cold place.

I race to catch my mum before she disappears into doing the duties of the temple, when suddenly I get stopped by the local helper. Her name is Chhoti bai, literally meaning “little woman”. It is a term of endearment everyone in the temple uses towards her, but I have never understood how it sounds affectionate in any way.

“You want water?” she asks kindly in Hindi. Due to her rural upbringing she pronounces her words in a way very different from my own family. Her words have a lilting quality to them, but they are still understandable.

“Yes please, to take a bath.”

She smiles and walks over to the well situated in the garden. Skilfully she lowers an empty pail into its dark recesses as my sister and I watch from the side, clumsily clutching onto our traditional garments, our towels, and our many toiletries. The face washes, body soaps and shampoos all seem out of place here. Meanwhile Chhoti bai has filled the large iron wok with water and has also lit up the coal.

“The water is heating up. Use these jugs to empty it out into the pails once it’s hot. Then add cold water from the taps in the bathroom. Okay?”

“Yes, thanks, Chhoti bai.” we say. My sister and I are standing bare-footed on the cold ground in the backyard. Here at the temple we aren’t allowed to wear any footwear, whether we are in the garden or in the house. All of it is considered holy ground, and footwear is seen as being impure.

“The ground is cold,” my sister groans.

“I know.”

³Hindi for “elder sister”

“So I can go first, right?”

I look at her, not saying anything.

“Didi, please let me go first, I will be quick.”

“Fine,” I say.

There is a steady stream of vapour escaping from the water now. I hand my things over to my sister and scoop jugs of water into the pail. It seems to take forever even to fill it up halfway which isn't a surprise – the “pails” are actually empty cans of paint from the temple's recent renovation in preparation for the occasion. Suddenly my mum comes out into the backyard, already washed up and changed.

“You girls aren't done yet?”

“Mum, how is that possible? How are you done so quickly?”

“There's an electric water heater inside, I thought I told you?”

My sister and I look at each other, then to the red hot coals and we suddenly realise that we have been waiting around all this while for nothing. This was to be expected, my mum obviously entered stress-mode and completely forgot to instruct us on how to go about getting things done.

“Okay one of you take that bucket since it's already full. The other one come with me, I will get you some more water from inside.”

I give my sister the bucket I have just filled and follow my mum inside. Sure enough, at the back of the room we just entered, there is an electric heater. My mum places an empty bucket underneath it and tells me to wait till it is full. The water is trickling out at an agonisingly slow pace, but at least it is steaming hot.

Taking a bath in our temple-house is an experience in itself. I never look forward to it, and this time is no different. I step into the dimly lit, grimy bathroom and hang my many clothes onto the single hook hanging on the wall, praying it won't give in to the weight. I then proceed to mix cold water from the tap with the boiling hot water in my bucket. I tentatively dip my fingers in now and again to see if it has reached the right temperature. Unfortunately no amount of mixing seems to bring it to a comfortable temperature. Giving up I decide it will cool down eventually; either that or my body will have to get used to it.

The actual task of washing myself is even more arduous. There are no stools here, people often squat down or stand while taking a bucket bath in India. I opt to stand and use the first couple of jugs of water to wet my body completely. I always make sure to divide the water in the bucket into portions to make sure I have enough to wash the soap off in the end. The mineral composition of the water in this town also means that my soaps and shampoos never lather up, and so I am never truly convinced I am actually clean. Anyhow, I reach the end of my bath, clamber into my clothes trying not to let them touch the wet floor of the bathroom and walk out, feeling like I have accomplished a great task. My sister is waiting for me in the room, already dressed and ready to meet my granduncle.

“Let's go, Didi. We've taken too long.”

“I need to brush my hair and put on my accessories. Why don't you go ahead first?”

“Priyanka, just put on the basic things and look presentable. We're all going outside and sitting with him for a while,” my mum adds from behind.

I brush my towel-dried hair as best as I can and put on a *bindi* and a bracelet. I toss my scarf around my neck with the two ends hanging loose on my back in the traditional Indian way, and follow my mum and sister to the main temple where my granduncle usually sits.

“Touch his feet,” my mum tells me. Touching elders' feet is a sign of respect in the Hindu culture. As I touch his feet and rest my head on them too as an added sign of respect, I wait for some form of acknowledgement from him. However, all he does is look at me and then look away, chanting something under his breath as he always does. My sister is met with the same response.

This is nothing new; that is just the way he is. He is ninety after all, and his age, combined with his respected status, means that there is rarely any unnecessary communication from his side. We stand around – my mum, my dad, my sister and I – all dressed up in Indian clothes, smiling nervously and glancing at my granduncle. I look around the temple. Nothing much ever changes in here, year after year. The colourful idols of gods and goddesses, the steady stream of townsfolk who visit the temple to pray and seek my granduncle’s blessings, the sound of them praying under their breath – it is always the same.

After a few minutes of silence, my granduncle finally looks at us and says, almost inaudibly, “You must be tired from the journey, go and get some tea.”

Tea or *chai* as they call it in India is a way of life, and I love how the chai tastes here, creamy and sweet, a guilty pleasure. My mum gives him a quick smile and a nod, ushering my sister and me into the kitchen while my dad stays behind with my granduncle. However much the world may have progressed, patriarchal roles have stood the test of time within the walls of our temple. My dad would usually be found in the kitchen in the blink of an eye, but not over here. Men hardly ever enter the kitchen to cook unless absolutely necessary. They get involved in more manual tasks such as lighting fires and setting out rugs for people to sit on the floor, if they wish to help out in any way.

Ten minutes later I am sitting with my sister in the courtyard of the temple next to the well, sipping my cup of steaming hot *chai*. I pause for a minute to take it all in.

“It’s so peaceful here, isn’t it?” I say.

“Peaceful for us, because we don’t have to do anything much,” she says wisely.

There is silence between us again, except for the sound of us slurping up the *chai*. Evening is fast approaching and it is getting darker and chillier. The mosquitoes are also coming out of their daytime hiding spots, as if they can tell that, as more people come for the evening prayers, they will be in for a feast of their own.

Despite all the inconveniences I have often complained about – the bathrooms, the water, the insects, the random electricity outages, the lack of Wi-Fi or any form of connectivity, the noise and chaos that come with any Indian event, rules that are hard to abide by, and my granduncle’s scary silences – this place belongs to my family and I feel at peace here. I gulp down the last of my *chai* and head into the kitchen, hoping there will be more.

Carry on Caring

Kerry-Ann Canning

“Right, Kerry, c’mon, we need to get going here,” Stacey urges, gesturing towards the dinner trolley. Her deep purple uniform is torn at the arms and her shoes are, as usual, a creamy shade of white, certainly not representative of her cherished authority.

“No bother, Stacey,” I reply, in the calmest voice I can muster. As I hasten back to the trolley where Stacey is plating up more dishes, I’m stopped by Chrissie reaching out her arm to me.

“Please help me!” she cries, glaring desperately into my eyes.

“Are you ok, Chrissie?” I ask, looking from her distraught grey eyes to her busy plate.

“Chrissie, please try to eat something. Why don’t I get you a top up for that cranberry juice?”

Chrissie’s eyes widen. “Yes please!”

Taking her cup over to the trolley, I can feel Stacey glaring at me.

“Kerry, we need to hurry up,” she repeats, thrusting potatoes onto the pale plates.

“I understand, no bother, Stacey.” I fill Chrissie’s cup with her favourite juice and return it to her. “Enjoy, Chrissie,” I say with a reassuring smile.

“Thank you, hen!”

“Kerry, can you please help Joan?!” Stacey commands, her large stature still looming over the dinner trolley.

“Yes, not a problem, Stacey,” making my way over to Joan.

“Once you’ve done that, could you go along to Rose?”

“Of course, not a bother.” Smiling at Joan, I provide her with her first taste of tonight’s special dish.

“Nice,” Joan murmurs in her quiet, refined voice.

“Good, Joan,” I encourage.

Five minutes later and Joan has had enough steak pie for one night, shaking her head and making a face when I try to offer her one last forkful.

“No worries, Joan, I shall get you your pudding.” At least she’s had something to eat tonight.

“Kerry, have you been to Rose yet?”

“Not yet, Stacey, but Joan has eaten...”

“Well, you just go on ahead then.” From across the room, Stacey nods her head towards the door, her hands busy feeding Anna, who appears to have at least fifty percent of her dinner on her apron, rather than in her mouth.

“I’ll just get Joan her pudding and I’ll head straight along to Rose.”

“Go now!” Stacey rolls her eyes.

Reluctantly, I head along to Rose, regretful that I can’t even deliver Joan’s pudding to her.

“What can you do, Kerry, you’ve just got to follow what she says,” I mutter reassuringly to myself as I walk along to Rose’s room, carrying her petite portion of steak pie.

Assisting Rose with her meal and having our usual chatter in between mouthfuls, keeps me away from the dining room, and away from Stacey, for a good ten minutes. However, as I’m making my way back to the dining room, Stacey whizzes past me pushing Betty in her wheelchair, as if she’s entered a wheelchair race to which Betty certainly has not consented.

“Right, come on, Kerry, get the residents out of the dining room and get started on your list,” Stacey orders.

“Yip, no bother, Stacey,” I reply, under my breath this time.

“Oh, and could you come along to Betty’s room in about ten minutes?” she shouts back.

“Not a problem!” Facing the corridor ahead, I spot Gemma. “Alrighty there, Gemma?”

“Where are the children?” she asks, bringing her head up to face me.

“They’re safe and sound. They’ve all had their dinner and will be going to bed shortly,” I reply, maintaining eye contact with Gemma.

“But where *are* they?”

“They’re just downstairs, Gemma.”

Gemma shakes her perfectly permed head, pressing her eyes shut.

“They’re being really well cared for by the staff there,” I add.

“I hope so.”

“I can assure you that I will personally check on them later tonight.”

Gemma’s eyes pop open and a beaming smile wrinkles her cheeks. “Would you do that?” she pleads, grasping my fingers tightly.

“For you, Gemma, anything. In fact, I’ve even learned that song you taught me.”

“Which one?”

I clear my throat in expert fashion before singing, “you are my sunshine, my double Woodbine, my box of matches to light my fag...” I nod encouragingly at Gemma until she joins in.

“My gill of whiskey, to keep me frisky, please don’t take my sweetie rations away!” we chant together, with Gemma giving us a bassline with her walking stick.

“You see, Gemma, you teach me so much!”

“Did I teach you that?” she asks, her smile replaced by a look of uncertainty.

“You did indeed, and I must say that I like it even better than the original.” I take her hand and shake it gently. She smiles and we return, for a moment, to a blissful, happy state, before I direct her along to the lounge and we part company, leaving me to contemplate my plan of action for the evening.

As I start to walk back to the dining room, I hear screams coming from behind me. Quickly realising that the screaming isn't Cathy Cassidy, who often makes loud, sometimes startling, noises, I hasten back along the corridor. I follow the sound of screams until I reach Cathy's room, where I thrust open the door to reveal my colleague, Susan, in a headlock at the mercy of Cathy.

“Cathy, please let go!” Susan shrieks, with Cathy's grip remaining solid on her long, blonde ponytail.

“Hello, Mrs Cassidy!” I exclaim, raising my hands in the air to wave at her, knowing that this will distract her and give Susan sufficient time to free herself. “Good evening, Mrs Cassidy, how are we this fine evening?” I continue whilst Susan retreats to the bathroom. Smiling encouragingly at Cathy, who has already calmed down and is now holding my hand, I hear Susan mumble, “thank you, Kerry,” from the bathroom. “No bother at all, Susan.” I continue to comfort Cathy by rubbing her hand and making various smiley faces with her, before I decide to check on Susan in the bathroom.

“Are you ok, Susan?”

“Yeah, just embarrassed more than anything.”

“Don't you worry at all, it happens to the best of us, no matter how long you've been here.”

“Thanks, I just feel so silly, only here a week and already I'm in a headlock.” Susan shakes her head with her long, thin fingers covering her face.

“That's just Cathy's unique way of welcoming you to our family! Now remember, if you need any help at all, just buzz and I'll be right with you,” I reassure her, enjoying the newfound responsibility of taking care of the latest recruit. “Will you be ok here with Cathy, or would you like me to stay with you?”

“I think I'll be fine now, thanks,” Susan replies, her encouraging smile making me feel more comfortable in leaving her.

“Alrighty, great stuff. Bye, bye, Mrs Cassidy, see you later.” I wave to Cathy as I exit her room and take a moment to appreciate how privileged I am to have my St Francis family around me. With a renewed sense of purpose and a fresh spring in my step, I journey back to the dining room.

Police Station

Lucy McKean

Mum woke me up at half ten. I had plans to meet the boys in town, eh, to do a bit of shopping and probably get some lunch, so I messaged the group chat to double check what the plans were. James replied saying we should meet outside Bon Accord at half twelve, so I had a bowl of cereal, a shower, then asked mum for some money then got a bus into town.”

That was probably at twelve, yeah. The four of us all met outside Bon Accord. James and Chris had come straight from football and were absolutely freezing standing in the rain in their football kits, so I said we should go to Nandos to have our lunch. So off we went, and we managed to get a table and I think we were there for like an hour maybe? And then Scott said let's go to Office because he wanted new trainers, so that's where we went after Nandos.

So then we walked to Office but none of us bought anything there so then we went to JD. Mum gave me money but I didn't like any of the trainers, em, so I thought I'd maybe get a new rugby

top in JD instead.

So then we went into JD and we must've been there for about fifteen minutes. I went straight upstairs with James when we got there to look at the football and rugby stuff...but I didn't know where Scott was, um, I just assumed he was with Chris. Next thing I knew I was buying a top at the tills and the security alarm went off and the till lady ran to the door, um, and I just waited at the tills with James because she said to hold on.

Honestly I swear I had no idea that Scott had ran off with anything, I didn't even see him when I was in the shop. He never told me he was going to try and steal trainers, honestly. Swear on my mum's life."

Knock Knock, Knock

Jing Yi Goh

"GO. TO. BED. NOW!" Mom shouted at me.

I don't like it when Mom shouts at me. It feels like she hates me. My whole body is shaking. I don't like that. I can't control my hands... They make my head shake as well when I try to cover my ears with them. I can't move. Why do I feel like a tree when Mom shouts? My legs are stuck to the ground... Like tree roots. But my body is shaking. Just like the tree outside my window, when the short hand on the clock pointed between '2' and '3'. When everything was dark, and the ghosts came out. Mom says it was the wind, but she doesn't understand.

Mom doesn't understand.

'I'm saying this one last time. Go to bed.'

Mom is scary. I don't want to feel like this. My heart feels so strong and fast, like it's going to jump out of my body. My heart feels like my dogs when I let them out on the field. They jump everywhere. My heart is jumping everywhere. Why? Everything feels like a dream. Am I dreaming? I don't want to feel like this. I run up to my room. I don't want Mom to shout again. Mom doesn't understand. I can't sleep. They will get me. They're in my room.

I look at the white door in front of me. I'm scared. But Mom will shout again. They're going to get me. I turn the doorknob – slowly – twice to the left, then to the right... Then as fast as I can, I kick the door open and run to flick on the lights. I quickly turn around. They're not here. I did it fast enough. I'm safe. I remember to breathe.

No not yet.

Quickly, the toilet! The toilet! Before they hide in there! The toilet in my room is connected to the empty room beside mine. I cannot let them hide there. I run to the toilet and before I reach the door I see the square lines on the floor. Six steps in each square, six steps. '1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6.' I count, '1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6.' The light switch! Four times. Up, down, up down. One more time! Up, down, up, down. Click, click, click, click. The lights end up being turned off. They always do. Even numbers always make them turn off. I'm safe. I run to the covers and hid under them. I'm safe.

For now.

Mom comes in and turns off the lights. I hope I don't die.

'You better not let me catch you up again.'

Mom doesn't understand. I'm going to die. They will get me. Everything is dark. The clock is ticking louder now. Tick, tick, tick.

Suddenly, from the toilet door, knocking... Softly... *tok, tok, tok...* 3 times. Oh no. I'm crying. No. No. *Tok, tok, tok...* 3 times. I need to open it. They will get me if I open it but if I don't open it something even worse will happen. I don't want something even worse to happen. I can't turn on the lights or Mom will come in but if I don't open the door something even worse will happen. The

voices in my head are everywhere, I don't know what's what anymore. My heart is really fast again. It's jumping everywhere again. But everything seems to be in... slow motion? *Tok, tok, tok...* 3 times. I have to open it. I walk towards the toilet door. My whole body is shaking again. Six steps in each square. '1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6'; '1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6.' I can't turn on the lights. I'm going to die. But I need to open the door.

I open it. I turn the knob and push the door as hard as I can. It knocks against the toilet bowl and- CRASH. A million bells, ringing in my ears. The door connected to the empty room is open. I see the long mirror in that room. I see myself in the mirror. H... hello? Something pushes me into the toilet. I'm crying. Suddenly, all around me. *Tok, tok, tok.* 3 times.

The Noorani Boy

Lauren Waliji

People flit out of the mosque, the evening air much more palatable than the stifling heat inside. A woman stops just outside, the hem of her cotton blue dress ripples with the light wind. The door opens out onto the dirt of the street, cars littering the yard a few steps away. The smell of hot buttered sweetcorn calls to the children, begging francs from their parents.

"Shamsah!" the woman in the blue dress calls out to her friend just stepping out of the doorway.

"Ah, Nishat." This woman wears a plain green sari, simple compared to the dress of her friend. "I did not see you in the crowd." The two women embrace and Shamsah spies her husband wandering towards the truck behind Nishat.

"How is Hassanali? How is Shemshir?" Nishat fires off these questions without expecting answers before continuing, "Have you heard about the Noorani boy?"

Shamsah stifles an eager smile, her friend has a head full of nothing but gossip, and consequently they are good friends. "No I haven't, Nishat, you mean Salim?"

"Yes, yes Salim. Have you heard what happened?"

"No, my friend, tell me. Ah, hello, Yasmin." The two women are joined by a third, who has diverted from the last trickle of women still exiting the mosque. Yasmin greets both women with a kiss to both cheeks and a 'bonsoir', switching their conversation from the Kutchi, used most commonly in the Ismaili mosque, to her much more practised French.

"Yasmin, have you seen the Noorani family at all?" Nishat peers at her friend, eager to stretch the anticipation. Shamsah gives a sigh at the restraint, aware that Shemshir is probably beginning his third sweetcorn. He will be sick.

"No, no but I've heard all about little Salim -"

"Yes, Salim." Nishat hurries on. "The military were at his school, you know the public school he goes to?" Shamsah makes a noise of encouragement while Yasmin nods energetically in confirmation. "They took the boy out of lessons to go to the headmaster's office, they told him he was in trouble." Nishat lowers her voice to a hush. "Both the Nooranis were there with a general."

"They didn't take the boy?" Shamsah frowns, her face anxious and her eyes narrowed towards her friend.

"Yes. They said Ridi had seen the boy take a pen and mark the President's photo."

"No!" Shamsah refused to acknowledge this.

"Yes. The boy was taken to the Dilala military prison. He's still there, I believe." Nishat spares a brief glance over her shoulder, "They are trying to get him out but you know the Nooranis, they have nothing."

Both other women nod their heads, the melancholy rests heavy on them.

“Alfred will be signing his name tomorrow, we told him to sign up to take the bakery,” Shamsah tells her friends. “I hope we can trust him more than the Nooranis could trust Ridi.”

“They should never have let him sign up for them, he has stolen from them before. It was an unwise decision.” Nishat looks grave. She moves her hands over her skirt, smoothing out creases that aren’t there.

“Yes, but they believed he would be fair. They thought he would act as representative while they kept the shop. He *has* worked for them for fifteen years,” Shamsah replies. Defeat is substantial in her tone.

“Nationalisation.” Yasmin clicks, “first they don’t like the Belgians and then they do the same thing and call it nationalisation. You know the foreign owned farms, the Belgians left? Given to the Congolese, a general’s son. First the businesses, then the land and soon they talk of banning western clothing and names and food.”

“It was the same in Tanganyika and Burundi and now here, it’s inevitable,” Nishat reminds the women, “but the Nooranis are hoping to get the boy out, perhaps with help from family, and then they will go to Canada.”

“The book will need to be thick to get the boy out.”

“Forget the bribe, Yasmin, how will they take the boy food? If they cannot pay guards then the boy cannot get food,” Shamsah’s genuine concern even overshadowing the joy gained from a good gossip.

Over by the faded pearl blue Peugeot, Hassanali has taken what he believes is Shemshir’s fifth sweetcorn away from him. The sounds of low murmurs and mumbles across the multiple groups gathered in the yard are quiet enough so that the faint whine of mosquitos can be heard above them. And yet Hassanali’s scolding is barely audible, his tone soft and his words successful. Shemshir leaves the sweetcorn vendors alone and climbs into the back of the truck.

“Did the boy really do it?” Yasmin wonders.

“You are stupid, no? Of course not. Ridi said that the boy marked the photo. That he saw the boy do it at seven in the morning. He said that he saw it from the open hallway window,” Nishat explains

“Ah, I see.”

“Yes, you do. The boy would not be up at seven, he is like my Karim. He would not be up before eight. He wants to be rid of the family, greedy man. He has the business, legally it is his. He doesn’t need them. And no one leaves windows open. You wouldn’t offer a thief a drink, would you?”

“Emigrating, it’s really the only option left,” Shamsah determines, peeking over to see her husband falling asleep in the front of the truck as Shemshir swings from the bare tarpaulin bars across the back. The other two women groan. “I can’t see Shemshir being taken to Dilala, or Kasapi just down this road. The younger generals coming in, they want money quickly. They know the shuffling goes on in the party, so they do this. They know we will pay quickly, before they can be moved about.”

“And yet, given some time, we will not be able to pay.” At Nishat’s statement the three women fall silent.

The crowd thins and the wind picks up. The sun begins to set.

Mother Knows Best

John Scott

It's a warm Sunday afternoon. Two women are sitting side by side on a bench in a well-kept garden. They both have bright blond hair, although one has some grey roots sneaking through. Nicole, the younger of the two, has a restless, squirming baby held to her chest and is gently swaying back and forth. She has white stains over each shoulder of a light-blue cardigan.

"I think he must be hungry, wee mite," says the other woman.

"I know, but a post on Mumsnet said you shouldn't feed them too often."

"Mumsnet? Bloody Mumsnet. I am your mother. I wonder how any baby survived before the words of wisdom from the almighty strangers of Mumsnet. When I had you and your brother I fed you as and when you wanted... Oh wait, that must explain why you turned into ungrateful little bastards then."

"Right, right, right. I get your point."

"Let the wee blighter feed, he'll settle right down you'll see."

Diane is wearing a yellow cardigan in the exact same style as Nicole's. It's borrowed. Three-month-old Kieran threw up over the back of the jumper she was wearing. This one is very loose on Diane but flowing outfits seemed to be her look lately.

"You know something no-one ever tells you about breastfeeding?" Nicole says, as she moves Kieran into position. "I thought it was just one little hole, but there is some proper udder shit going on down there."

"Probably didn't help that you got your nipples pierced when you were sixteen."

"No! Jeez, Mum, I took them out ages ago and it's healed up. That's not what I meant, the whole areola gets involved. There's like eight more holes down there. It's like a fountain."

"I knew what you meant, I was only teasing you." Diane says, leaning across to hover over Kieran "Oh, your mama is a sensitive one isn't she, my dear?"

"Right, Mum, don't disturb him. Just about to give him a feed like you said."

"Oh don't worry, if he's anything like you were, as soon as the tit's out he'll be thinking about nothing else." Her eyes brighten and glint wickedly as she says, "Your father's much the same actually."

"Thanks for that image, Mum."

"I wouldn't be doing my parental duties if I wasn't disturbing you at least once a day. You'll understand when this one gets a bit bigger." She moves back to give them some space and Kieran reaches up to pull at Nicole's top.

"You guys are ganging up on me," she says softly to them both. "Give me a second."

Kieran's wriggles become perceptibly more excited as Nicole supports him with the crook of one arm, then slips her top up enough to let him latch on. She repositions him to face her uncovered nipple and nuzzles it against his nose. It takes a few seconds before his head bumbles forward to take it. He makes a firm latch, chin hungrily pumping up and down, giving a few contented gulping noises before settling into the feed, free hand gently pawing at the air.

"So, Mum... You sounded different on the phone earlier." Nicole's voice strains a little as she moves into a more comfortable position, "I know something's been going on, I wish you would just tell me."

"You've had enough on your plate with this big bruise here," she nods affectionately towards Kieran, "and I guess I didn't want to say anything until they knew for sure."

"What's going on, Mum?"

"Well, you probably noticed that my stomach has been a bit more upset than normal."

"Yep, that we did."

“Oh shush, you... Okay, so it’s been going on for a few months, I just put it down to a flare up of my IBS. Work has been pretty stressful lately, we’ve had a couple of partners leave the firm so we’ve all had to pick up the slack...”

Kieran starts to wriggle again and Nicole turns her head down to soothe him. Her hair falls across her face and she makes no effort to push it back.

“It’s been worse the past month, so your father nagged me into taking a day off work to see the doctor.”

Nicole moves her finger to Kieran’s groping hand, he grabs it, pulling it in towards him.

“They sent me for some scans.” Diane sighs deeply, building up her nerve, “And, long story short, they’ve told me I’ve got pancreatic cancer.”

The wind blows. A bird chirps. Kieran continues to suckle.

“I... I wasn’t expecting this. Oh god, Mum.”

“And I don’t want you all wasting time wailing hysterically and don’t want anything to change. I just thought that you should know.”

Diane reaches over and pushes Nicole’s blond hair from her face. There are no tears.

“Christ, thank god for that. I couldn’t have you blubbering like your brother. You were always more resolute but the baby hormones might have got to you.”

Nicole closes her eyes for a second before opening again. Her shoulders fall back and her head raises as she turns her body towards her mother. A smile crosses her face but does not reach her eyes.

“Chris was always such a wuss.” The smile fades a little. “But, Mum... This is huge. Like, will you need chemo or something?”

“They told me the survival rates of the different treatment options and it all seemed pretty bleak to me. I am pretty much bugged at this point. I don’t want to spend the rest of my time in a hospital bed for a percentage chance of an extra year or two.”

Kieran turns his head from Nicole’s breast and she briskly readjusts her clothing before moving him up her shoulder to wind him. Diane takes a muslin cloth out of a bag and gently drapes it over her daughter’s cardigan.

“What do you want to do then?”

“Well, this has actually brought things into focus for me. I see that all the things I spent so long fretting over are ultimately just so unimportant. I spent my whole life trying to act a certain way so that people would perceive me in a certain light. You know, I feel relieved that all that pretence is behind me.”

“Mum. When have you ever held yourself back? Don’t you remember the time when I wanted to go out in a crop top and the skirt you thought was too short.”

Diane sighs with mock whimsy “And I said that I was so proud of my little girl growing up to be a prostitute.”

“Right in front of my friends. I was so humiliated.”

“That was rather the point, my dear.”

“I get that now.”

Diane takes the freshly burped child from Nicole, bringing him close to her. He seems completely relaxed and content.

“You know, I think I took my time for granted. I was going to gently crease into an old lady of questionable continence. I was looking forward to coming to pee on your couch.”

“Well, that is one of the many things I won’t miss”

They laugh a little.

The wind picks up and Diane tries to tuck the cardigan she is wearing around Kieran to keep him warm. He pushes it away, he is a fidgety boy and always wants to be able to see what is going on.

“Right, let’s take this one inside and see if that layabout of a man you call your husband has been able to rustle up some semi-edible food.”

“Mum, are you ever able to not say exactly what’s on your mind?”

“Never.”

They laugh some more, and this time it is less forced.

With that Diane stands up, her first grandchild in her arms. She slowly, but surely, makes the short walk back to the house. She pulls faces and makes cooing noises at Kieran. He soon begins to giggle which sets her off as well. Their laughter fades away through a set of French doors. Nicole remains sitting on the bench, watching them walk away. She takes a minute before following them inside.

Cover illustration:
Friends Seeking Solace
Watercolour
by **Gillian McGeough**
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The purpose of this project was to explore non-verbal communication as a platform of human expression in the care setting. By experimenting with different media and artistic techniques, I learned how to influence the mood of a piece by utilising the tone, composition and contrast to achieve a powerful and emotive outcome. My final pieces explore the physical manifestations of a person's emotions by studying the particularly expressive zones of the face and hands. Ultimately, I hope to evoke viewer empathy and encourage the future processing and interpretation of the visual information offered by, and regarding, those around us.

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